CutBank

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CUTBANK EIGHTY-SEVEN

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Jillian Merrifield

Demolition Plan

"You look nice today," Rowan says when he gets a good look at me. I'm in the kitchen, slicing baby peppers pole to pole, and to be fair I'm dressed much nicer than I need to be for cooking, and to be fair I also don't probably need to have my hair in long dragging beachy waves for this, but I think we've also gotten to the point in our relationship when he's just used to my hair being around his food. Our relationship stretches out in my head like a galaxy and I have no idea when in that empty expanse it became okay, but I'm pretty sure it did. I wish there had been a signpost.

"Thanks," I say. I don't want to give it too much attention. Being dressed up to stay home shouldn't be a thing we talk about. I'm embarrassed by it.

"Did you go into the office today?"

"It's not an office. And no. Worked from home." I slip the knife into the crunching structure of the peppers and feel them bleed a bit on me. "I think I get more done at home when I don't have to listen to people clipping their nails in the next cube over."

He shrugs. "That's a rite of passage though. If you don't hear people clipping their toenails at work, what will you have to commiserate over with the rest of us?"

My necklace itches my neck. Rowan is walking around the breakfast bar. He'll hug me. It will make me feel squirmy. It goes down the

way I expect, my arms trapped by my sides and my eyes on the walls, which also seem too close. We're off balance and I'm still holding the knife, careful not to slide it into him. He's saying that he understands why I didn't follow our routine today, but that I need to try again tomorrow. If he says it with a hug, I can't get defensive.

"Did you go to the grocery store?"

I shake my head. He's not looking. He's already way down the hall, might as well be over a horizon. "Did you get the mail?" I yell after him. He didn't—I know he didn't because it's not here in front of me, but I know if I ask he'll go get it for me and I won't have to walk down two flights of stairs and smell our neighbor's cigarettes.

• • •

Rowan makes us whiskey sours after dinner and we curl up on the couch with the laptop to cruise Craigslist, not routine but agreed upon. We're quiet, thinly clothed, comfortable—he clicks, I read over his shoulder. There's something crunchy in the buttons of his mouse—I hear it break a bit with every click.

"Some people are really racist," I say after a while.

He nods. We move on. We find a few ads that are interesting enough to both of us, which we know without really even talking.

"Do you want to email, or should I?"

"You."

"Why me?"

"Because I'll be nervous about checking my email for days."

"I will too."

"But you don't have to check your email for work. I do. I can't not."

"We don't have to do this. If you're not into it. If it's causing you anxiety."

"I want to do it. I just need you to help me."

He writes the email. I copyedit. He presses send and then, riding the buzz of anticipation and alcohol, catches my eye, gauges carefully, slips his fingers into my hair, slides to my scalp, grips. I burn bright. No need to say anything.

• • •

We get a fairly quick response, I think, but maybe I don't know what's normal, only know what's avoidant. Rowan texts me from work, interrupting a conversation with my mother. I'm swearing up and down that I just don't have time to drive to Madison for a week—can't leave my work for that long, Mom, I'll see you at Christmas if you don't come here first. No, I can't manage and write the blogs from there. I have her on speaker, so I see it when the text message pops up. I'm cross-legged on our new couch, alternating between staring at the dull gray wall and staring at the bright void of my computer screen. I could lean a bit and find myself confronted with the boundaries of the room.

They want to get dinner first, Rowan says.

Make it happen, I say, and I say "No, Mom, I can't. I just can't come up there right now." I feel like dinner is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask for. I like to believe I'm the kind of person who would just ask for a coffee date, but dinner is fine.

Maybe Il Vicolo, I say. Every time we've gone, we've been seated at the same table—by the front window, so I can watch everybody come in on one side and turn my head and watch the whole restaurant. And we haven't been there in a while. Sometimes when I haven't been to a place in a while, I think about how people confuse light years for a measurement of time rather than distance. I think they can be both, in that special way that things can be everything everybody believes.

Awful fancy, he says. *I'll pick a night with them.*

They'll just think we're classy. Until they see our home.

Mom has moved on from me, I think. But also, her mind is still in Madison, where it's been this whole conversation. She's just stopped imagining me there with her.

• • •

Later. I'm naked, tweezing my eyebrows, leaning way into the bathroom mirror with all the torso I've been allotted, letting the dark hairs drift down into the sink where I might just blame them on Rowan. I've been consulting with a friend about how her boobs look in a dress. I feel weird about this,

but maybe she and I are reaching a different point in that friendship. I don't really understand these organic things. I would like relationships better if they came with rungs I could climb. I might look down and see the span stretch and distort with vertigo, but at least I could see a rung in my fingers.

Rowan comes home from work. I think about wrapping a towel around myself but don't bother. The door is open and I can hear him calling me, but I don't say anything because really, it's not that big of an apartment and I can practically see the front door in the mirror. I know just where to stand, just where to lean, to hold every inch of the apartment in my senses.

"Tomorrow night," he says, because why not get right to the point, even if I don't like being ambushed with these things. "They said they love Il Vicolo."

"Oh," I say. Maybe they know it better than we do. Maybe they have a different favorite table, where they sit amidst everybody else. Maybe it's in a different waiter's section and we won't have Lloyd serving us.

"What time?"

"Six," he says, and slides an arm around my side. I haven't leaned back from the mirror, and he slips behind me, a hand on each hip, but I give his reflection a look and he laughs.

"You're right. I should ditch my work clothes first."

When he goes to the bedroom, he's in the one part of the apartment I can't see in the mirror or from the front door—the safest, deepest part. We rarely even turn on the lights in there—just creep into bed and fumble around at the right times.

"Do they seem cool?" I call after him.

"I mean, as cool as you can seem in an email."

I don't know what that means.

• • •

I DON'T GET out of bed the next day when I'm supposed to. Rowan is mad at me at first, which I know he will be and am okay with—it's better than trying to go out. It's too much today. When he texts me around noon, it's a peace offering, a reminder of a shared commitment to the day's agenda.

So I'll pick you up at like 5:50, ok?

I'm in the kitchen, making a smoothie, running the blender one-handed and trying to text real words back. I've changed clothes three times today, and right now I've got a shirt and necklace but no pants. Chrissy Hynde rattles the windows when she catches them just right. The next-door neighbors are home sick, both of them, and before I put the music on I could hear their coughing through the walls, a hacking assault. I'm not alone enough. I lean against the oven.

Yeah. That's fine.

• • •

WHEN ROWAN POPS back in, I see that he's dressed more hipster-professional than normal today—blue tweed pants, brown belt, over-patterned shirt.

There's a little too much gel in his hair and he fiddles with his glasses every few seconds, like each millimeter they slip down his nose is actually a mile.

"You look great," he tells me. "Like, you know. A good mix between respectable and sexy."

"That's what I aim for," I say. He's being careful to perform as required. Tell me I look ok. Be on time. Be predictable. He'll drive the same route we always do, I'm sure. Won't ask that we walk. I close my computer without saving. I know he notices, but he doesn't say anything about that either. "Do you have to do anything to get ready?"

"Nope, I'm good," he says. I don't say that I need more time. We're running out of time if we don't want to be late, which is worse than leaving anxious. I go in for a hug. "It's not a big deal, Abbs," he tells me. "We're just getting to know them. If it's not chill, we never have to see them again."

"Until we run into them at the grocery store or something," I say. "Or at the park. Or we find out that one of them works with you."

"It's a big city. I think you're stretching a bit."

"It's a small world." I let my hand navigate down his arm to his fingers and let go of the rest of him. "What if one of them comes to work with me? People move in and out of that place all the time." One of my greatest dislikes of coworking is that you never know who will be sitting next to you; you can only assume anonymity as you launch your blog empire.

"Ready?"

I nod. I walk. When we get to the door he opens it. The hallway stinks of cat piss and cigarettes, even though it looks clean and respectable.

It's a wall of things that my apartment is not.

"It smells fucking horrible," I say.

"I keep saying we need to move," Rowan says, but he doesn't say the other things that logically follow that statement. We need to find a place. We need to talk to a leasing agency. We need to prove income. I need to pull my weight more. Go outside more.

I can do none of these things.

"I can't go," I say, two steps beyond the door.

"Why not?" he asks. He's pulling on me a bit.

"I can't."

He sighs. His brain downshifts. "How can I make it easier?"

"You can't. I can't go."

"Just take a deep breath." He watches me. I do it twice. My brain keeps skittering."Do I need to cancel?"

It begins to feel like a dawn, a mist, a tide, an enveloping, a drowning. The world is there, but it's becoming less important than the froth in my brain. "No. You have to go. We can't cancel. Just tell them I wasn't feeling well. You should have asked for pictures from them. Pictures would have helped."

"They're still going to want to meet you."

"Just tell them about me. Show them pictures of me. Have a drink. Have fun. I trust your judgment." In fact, for me their personalities matter very little—it might be more fun not to meet them first. The meeting is mostly for them. They wanted it.

"Yeah, but you trusting me doesn't solve the problem. They will still want to meet you. So they know I'm not some creeper."

"If it goes well, just set something up for this weekend. Sunday, maybe." A few days is enough to prepare mentally. This was too much of a surprise. Too quick. "For here, obviously. I mean, I doubt they have a king-sized bed."

"Why on earth do you doubt that?"

I shrug. "I just do."

He starts down the stairs. He's mad at me again.

• • •

I GET UNDRESSED. It's a relief. I hang up my necklace. I hang up my dress, stand my boots in the closet with their peers. I try to eat dinner, but it ends up just being some crackers and cream cheese and pepper jelly. Rowan is probably trying to keep his enthusiasm for risotto to polite levels while I eat Triscuits. I can still hear the neighbors coughing to one side, so I turn up the music again.

• • •

LATER. I SWITCH to headphones because I have manners, although I think it would also be polite for them to just take some medicine. It's very dark outside, and everything outside the windows has basically disappeared. I

pull the curtains closed and things disappear for real, replaced with the safety of dull fabric. Because it's late, I go to the bedroom and slip under the covers, but because it's also early and because things are different, I don't fall asleep, I just keep listening to music. I wonder why Rowan isn't home yet. Maybe they really hit it off. Maybe he went back to their place after they killed two bottles of wine. Maybe they liked him so much that they didn't even feel like they needed me, figured they'd try things without me. I can think about their bodies touching, and I can feel the friction they could feel, the heat, the need of it, but I can't construct a room for them to do it in, so I figure that means it can't actually be happening. If it was a thing that could happen, I should be able to imagine it fully. And surely it wouldn't be so vanilla.

I get up and take half a Xanax. Just to take the edge off until Rowan gets home.

Maybe they got into a fight over the bill. Rowan does always order the special there, and he can hold more than his fair share of alcohol. Maybe it was going swimmingly but then it all fell apart and glasses of wine were thrown and Rowan is still shamefully helping the waiter clean up in the restaurant.

Maybe they're just still sitting at the bar. I can picture that. There are upside-down glasses, bottles of gin and whiskey and bourbon and vodka arranged on the wall, spotlit. I can feel how the barstools feel under your legs, especially bare legs. I can hear the languid trickle of people leaving as their shifts end. Something about the light in there always makes Rowan

look tanner than he really is. The light in our apartment makes me look like a vampire. Lack of sun makes me look like a vampire.

I'm not facing the bedroom door, and I don't hear anything, but I know, through some unarticulated sense, that the room has changed and so I turn over and take my headphones out of my ears. Rowan is standing there, and invisible to me but clearly, raucously, present are two other people, a man and a woman, laughing in the hallway.

"Hey," Rowan says.

"What the fuck." Hiss. Be quiet. Hide. Can't run, can't fight.

"They really wanted to meet you."

I think all of my consciousness is in my heart, in the opening and closing of each of its doors, in the filling and emptying of its rooms. Except for the bit of me that's in my ears still and can hear drum hits leaking from my headphones.

"And really, we hit it off so well, I just kind of figured, why wait for the weekend? I think all three of us are trying to be more impulsive." This is the wrong thing. But he doesn't seem to realize it's the wrong thing for me.

There's a bit of me in my nose, too, I think. I can smell wine on him. And my tongue. I didn't brush my teeth. I can taste my own wine.

"What do I do?" I ask. Small. Smaller on the inside than the outside.

"Just meet them!" he says. "Hey, guys, come in here and meet Abbs."

"Rowan!" But it's late, my understanding of space-time is wrong

and they're already in the room as I'm saying it. The woman, tall, curvy, backlit, looks somewhat embarrassed when her shadow casts itself over me in bed.

"I think you should have given her a moment to get up, Rowan," she says mildly.

"Nah, it's fine. Abbs, I told them loads about you and they just really wanted to come see you." The man stands behind his wife—I can see their rings, modest, but hers does glimmer a little. Rowan comes over and turns on the bedside lamp and I can see them a bit more clearly. "This is Drew and Phoebe," he tells me. Drew has lingering acne scars, which he's tried to cover up with facial hair, and Phoebe's eyes drift a bit, but they aren't bad looking at all. Their clothes say young-but-established professional, which I find comforting, because their clothes fall into the same style as my own, careful replications of advertisements. They're just Rowan and me in a few years, if I could go out and if Rowan had acne scars. I wave. Awkward. Wrong.

"Rowan told us a bit about you and what you're into," Phoebe says. I don't say these are supposed to be secret things, mine to give out, now uncollectable. I suppose these are things I should trust Rowan with.

Drew nods with his wife. He seems like the quieter one, although that doesn't really mean anything—it just means that I can't find what he's thinking if I go looking for it. "We were thinking maybe we could play around a bit, if you're feeling up to it. If not, we can just chill. Maybe have a drink. Whatever you think is right for you."

"I mean…I don't know," I say. "You guys are here, kinda feel like it's not a choice."

Phoebe looks at me oddly. "Of course it is. All you have to do is say no."

Rowan reads the room and suggests that they give us a minute, but Phoebe suggests that she and I talk instead. "Just give us a couple of minutes," she says. The men nod and duck out. I hear Rowan say something about beer in the fridge.

"May I?" She asks, and nods at the bed. Again, there isn't really a choice for me here. There's nowhere else for her to sit in the room, unless she sits on the floor, and you can't have a guest sit on the floor, and if she stands then there's an air of physical dominance to the way she uses the space, I have to look up at her, and that doesn't seem right either. She sits down next to me, in Rowan's spot, and I shove my phone and headphones to the floor. I'm a bit embarrassed by the Ikea bedsheets. I didn't wash them. I didn't know. Am I supposed to have more interesting stuff on the wall than this? We can't even paint because of our landlord.

We sit for a minute. I think she's letting me work through the fact that she is here, in my place, without my permission, and to be honest it's the best thing she could do because everything feels destabilized, like I could look in the bathroom mirror and not see the front door, sit on the couch and not reach out and touch the wall, and like Rowan and Drew are a million miles away, though the sound of their voices moves faster across those miles than light ever could. I can't let my heart race because

she'll hear it. I can't breathe fast because she'll hear it. I can't leave the bed because this is my place, and I can't go anywhere else because those places are not my places, and in some corner of myself I'm so deeply angry with Rowan because these are all things that he knows but can't feel. So I wait for the moment I hope will come, the moment when it all stops, when the molecules that make up the bed and the walls and the dirty carpet stop spinning, when the atoms re-bond. The moment when my brain is the mountains in winter, smoothed with snow that glues together even the tiniest pine needle nerve endings into something single, smooth, unpocked, devoid of details.

I wonder how much Rowan instructed her. How much he told her about me.

I turn to Phoebe—I can see it's what she's been waiting for, though she expects words—and I kiss her. With my eyes closed I can ignore the geography of the room and focus on topography, on navigating rises and falls in flesh, the smooth of buttons, the harsh polyester of her shirt rasping between our skin. I can appreciate her climate of heat, a dry heat really, and the relieving cool wind of breath as she whispers what the safe word will be, and reminds me that there will be no surprises, no borders will be transgressed, but also that they brought some of their own toys, since they figured we didn't have enough to go around. The click of the door opening might as well be the cleaving of tectonic plates, but I cling to the terrain, feeling the ridge of a c-section scar.

• • •

Later, floating, unmoored, I wait for Phoebe to be done in the bathroom, then slip in awkwardly after her, wordlessly, though she smiles at me. I wonder if this means she enjoyed her face forced between my legs, the inconsistent pressure between me and her tongue as Rowan fucked her from behind and her husband watched, waiting to switch in. A lot for a smile to say. I don't know if it's appropriate to tell her I'd like to do this again. In the bathroom I slip off the bits of clothing that were destroyed, a shirt that now gapes in front, panties torn down the back, intact only at the waistband. I throw them in the hamper even though that's not the right place for them. I come back out in my bathrobe to find Rowan and Drew washing toys in the kitchen sink, and that doesn't seem like the right place for that either. Phoebe, with intact clothes, emerges from my bedroom and we smile at each other again. I think my nipples are hard in the cold, sore from teeth and clamps, and I cross my arms to hide them. I think she smiles a little more when she tells me it was nice to meet me and that she hopes she made me feel comfortable.

When they're gone, with me waving awkwardly in the hallway, where I've rooted myself, away from the bedroom and away from the front door, Rowan slips his arms around me and I lean into it, hoping to get closer than I physically can. "Should we go to bed?" he asks. He's sleepy, like he always gets, and he smells like Phoebe's fruity body spray and Drew's deodorant.

"Yeah," I say. I cross my arms again when he releases me. "I'll be in in a minute." He gets himself some water while I stand there and kisses me on the cheek as he walks by. I feel too tall for the room, as though everything is bent in the cruelest, most subtle of funhouses. He leaves the bedroom door open and I approach it, hugging the wall, hoping I'm in a place where he can't see me, and then stop at the frame, and find myself unable to push my way in.

Ruby Hansen Murray

Ricochet

- Winner: Montana Prize in Nonfiction -

I'm dragging my suitcase up uneven stone steps to the rental car when my husband calls. I stop beside the sandstone blocks that stringy CCC boys fit together to make this cabin on our ancestral land near Bartlesville. I've stayed on this hill surrounded by black jack oaks during the June dances and our congressional election, and I'm ready to go home. It's early Sunday morning, and the air is warm and soft. My husband tells me fifty people have been shot in a nightclub in Florida. I sit on a stone step and trace the length of oak branches that fill each of the windows with green. In the moment it takes to learn that the killer was also shot and to pray there's no retaliation, I try to close the doors to my heart, like the heavy doors to the cedar barn at home. My husband, a man who has ready words for friends and strangers alike, says *I'm at a loss.*

Even if I wanted to see images from the shooting, there's no television in the cabin. I drive toward Hominy. Cars and trucks crawl around the McDonald's, Sonic, the Kum and Go where Pawhuska's Main Street and the highway intersect. The new construction is miles from the BIA superintendent's office on Agency Hill, the faded downtown.

I drive the easy curves south toward the Friends church. No one mentions the killings in Orlando. Sometimes the reservation feels like a

place apart. While the pastor's daughter reads a Bible verse, I remember the first time I went to a gay club and how free I felt. We used to call clubs the meat market; being out with Jerry made the air itself feel lighter.

It's potluck Sunday. We eat under large photographs of Hazel Harper and her sister, the old ladies in their blue striped blankets, presiding over the room in which they taught scholars Osage. The ugliness in Orlando doesn't pass through my lips, because there is nothing our words can do. And I don't want to witness fresh grief.

I travel toward the airport on roads over rolling hills in a grid that intersects small towns in oil country, listening to young reporters on the radio with repetitive post-shooting coverage. The Orlando victims' families speak shakily about the final phone call or text they received. A survivor talks about a girl shot in the arm, who bled out while they hid in the bathroom. *I shook her and I said, stay with me, now.*

There's an Orlando, Oklahoma, 21 miles north of Guthrie. It was first called Cherokee and was founded by the Doolin gang. Orlando, Florida, is full of theme parks, Disney World and Universal Studios. Orlando is a word familiar to literary and theatre people, a charade, a masquerade.

While I drive through small towns and a few churches surrounded by a scattering of cars, the reporters plan a call-in program to offer condolences and share sorrow. Whenever I scanned radio channels this last week, I heard white male preachers arguing *not right, not right. You're not right.* I'm afraid the reporters on this country station will slide into judgment about the gay club or Muslims, but they don't.

Xaxier Serrano Rosado was thirty-five, a dancer and the father of a five-year-old boy. Yilmary Rodriguez Sullivan was twenty-four and told her family a gay club would be safer, *there are shootings at the other clubs*. I listen to the radio for the two hours it takes to drive to Oklahoma City. It makes me angry to hear the surprise in the voices of the reporters that the survivors would live with the effects of violence for years. We will learn that the killer was a man hyped on steroids, spraying pain-hate-sadness outward, calling himself a jihadist for cover.

The Cimarron River winds across New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and into Oklahoma. Few people picture bison ranging this far, but Osages hunted them along the rocky slopes of the Cimarron. This is where Cherokees attacked our Osage family camp when the men were hunting. Osages women and children hid in scruffy cover while the Cherokees tracked them, killing and capturing. They hid overnight, listening and waiting. My great-great-grandmother was taken then; the course of her life, our lives, changed.

In my twenties, during a workday in Houston's Fourth Ward, a man carried me away from my car through a fence to an empty apartment. I remember moving through space, dull light and carpet.

I wonder if my mother said to my father, *your daughter was attacked*, in her English with its slight Caribbean inflection. Or *Ruby was raped*. Or whether my father overheard a conversation between my mother and my brother.

That day in Houston, my friend Sarah opened her door, looked

at me and asked *what happened, did you lose your job?* For a while she went with me to the downtown police station to look at men lined up against a wall. Getting to the room with one-way glass through the halls filled with a jumble of new arrests and groups of prisoners moving through the jail was as bad as standing with other women in a darkened room looking at the row of men.

On a weekday in Houston at the back of an apartment complex, a parking area under a metal roof, a man said *there's something wrong with your tire.* For months and months after that I stayed within the empty carpeted rooms and white walls of my apartment. Invisible meant safe.

It's not rape, if he's touching your eyelids gently, gently. *Don't look,* a soft voice, *or I'll have to put out your eyes*. I lay on the floor as if my bones had dissolved.

My father's voice on the phone. He was a man of so few words I can count the conversations we had. *Do you want me to come down there?* I had told my mother, but they were already not speaking, the relationship ulcerated. *No*, I said, *I'm okay*.

Jim and Jennie and John, my brothers and sister, feel badly, my mother said. *They're very sorry*. None of us spoke of it later; the words disappeared between us.

For months I snuck through the apartment complex where I lived, the blank white buildings, square windows, sliding through breezeways with my back to the wall, when I had to go to the laundry room, the mailboxes. Predators. A fireman I fell in love with, a battalion chief, married when I

met him, told me how consciously men think and talk about how to get sex from overweight women, single moms. *You just ask them how they're getting along*.

At the tribal college, a man reads from his short story about sorority sisters who never put out on the first date but will blow you on the second. A student reads a scene from a play he's written, has everyone laughing at a dad's desperate advice to his son. *At my age, I can still get it with the tourists . . . They don't look so bad*. His hair down his back, his bright smile. The continuum between getting it and taking it, hazy.

Rape. I can't hear the word, can hardly write it without a turn in my gut, my mouth feeling brackish. Women are trained to know it, fearful of it, conscious of it and the threat of violence. Men are bigger, stronger, those underlying muscles, the threat over our heads constant, the way an abalone sky fits over my home on Puget Island.

I went home to my family's house in Sacramento from Houston, to the ferns under filtered shade, a fishpond in that dry desert valley with its 107-degree days. When my parents' ready-to-go-to-violence yelling began, I left my brothers inside and went to sit under the high northern California sky and its few stars.

The morning of the Orlando shooting, a friend writes on Facebook, *They're killing us*, and I'm ashamed for the distance I want to keep.

I'm circling here, defensive. A year ago I heard munching just outside the window at midnight. I thought a deer was inside my fenced garden. From the back porch I heard the click of horns in the darkness.

In the beam of a flashlight, the backs of two bucks beyond the pasture fence glowed blond. They were breathing hard, making tight circles, their horns clacking as they pushed against each other. They didn't stop when I called, then rapped the flashlight on the metal railing. The light showed them jostling, their horns locked, quick jumps as they changed position. You could see their luminous eyes as they turned, necks curled, their heads down close to their front legs. I went inside while they were still circling, worried they'd hurt each other and we'd find one injured in the morning. My husband went out, and I heard, *Well, figure it out*. His voice was almost loving, compassionate but resigned.

I'd seen a stout older buck and a smaller, younger animal with three points walking back and forth to the trees by the ditch line. The Columbia River White Tailed Deer is a protected species that lives on the island with us. I'm not saying that human violence is inevitable, but maybe it is. At the same time I work for change, I have begun to feel there isn't enough time or good will or synergy for enduring solutions.

The day of the Orlando shooting, I fly out of the Oklahoma City Airport, which is more cosmopolitan than Tulsa's. The Homeland Security people are on edge. We're delayed at the gate by a computer problem on the aircraft. Passengers are unsettled, quiet. An expensively dressed couple waits. Professors at OU, I imagine, maybe Pakistani. I sit on the floor while my phone charges, and a woman in a hijab walks by holding her young child's hand. We're all waiting, the security people, the airline staff and passengers

for the plane to be fixed, for the next evil act. I call my husband to say we'll be late, if we get off the ground at all this evening, and I tell him that I love him.

Joseph J. Capista

Notes for the Next God

I want my god to hurt people.
I want my god the skylight
mid-shatter. I want my
god a grave-dropped aster.
I want my god the virus's
mutation. Glacier, flower:
debate the source of my god's
extinction. I want you ejected
through my god, to pick
from your face stray
shards of my god.
I want my god a glistening
diadem of offal. Turquoise
bruise. I want my god to deem
supplication the pre-death
pre-crash high-speed lipstick
application. I want my god
in memoriam alley graffiti.
Line between violence and culture.
Quantify my god in light
pollution. I want my god
to fade spectacularly in empty
windows too high to touch.
I want my god to
batter your heart, deepfry
your heart, serve your heart

to infidels on polystyrene.
Or the stranger's face she pictures
crushing, hot, atop her lover.
I want her lover to leave
in a caul of half-sleep
and search the twilit city
for an adulterated version
of my god. I want my god
to turn her silk charmeuse
to worms. I want my
god a malformed chamber
of the heart. Chamber music
of the mind as it de-electrifies.
Echoed note as you
remember my god's here.
My god is in the chamber.

Stefani Nellen

Saffira

- Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction -

Jip Janneberg, the only woman in the group, was finishing her warm-up, 200m strides with her teammates. Coach Eddy told them to focus on technique in the curve and to speed up on the straightaway, as a form exercise, not a race. But as soon as they were out of the curve, they were sprinting at full speed. You could tear a muscle that way, and no one cared whether you killed it in training. Still, they did it every time.

Jip lifted her knees and chin. Finish with pride, Eddy said. If she couldn't beat the guys, she could at least finish as part of the group instead of being dead last.

As a schoolgirl, she used to spend long summers getting up at five in the morning to run to the track for the first training of the day. She kept a log of all her training times, mapping them out so she could see her progress at a glance. She counted calories in these days, and did core stability exercises every night before going to bed. Whenever her parents and sisters went anywhere by car or by bike, she insisted she'd run, unless it was very far. Later, Eddy taught her that training logs and racing weight were only part of the story. You win the races with your head, he'd say. Jip had a good head, and she did win some races, but she never broke through into world-class times. Her PB in her best distance, the 1500 meters, was 4:04,

and after that perfect season four years ago, she had never come close to that shape or time again. There had been injuries and a lack of thrill; her study of history proved more interesting than she had expected, and by now she was a graduate student and already thinking about job applications. Lately, she had rehearsed telling Eddy that she wanted to retire from running.

When she got her breath back, she saw that Eddy was talking to a girl she had never seen before. The girl was small, dark-skinned, her black hair tied in two braids. Next to Eddy she looked tiny, hunching up her shoulders, her hands in the pockets of a bright blue jacket with the Team 4Mijl logo. She reminded Jip of the Kenyans and Ethiopians at the 4Mijl race each October: track stars and Olympians who came to Groningen for a payday after the track season was over. They barely talked before the race except, in whispers, to each other. They only removed their sweatshirts and long pants minutes before the start, rubbing their hands and shivering. Jip and the other Team 4Mijl runners also started in the elite corral, being the local heroes and all, but "the Africans," as everyone called them, pulled away quickly and finished minutes ahead of them.

"All right," Eddy said when the team gathered around him. "This is Saffira." The girl flashed a smile, as if trying to convince them she was harmless.

"Saffira is from Ethiopia, from Addis Ababa. Did I pronounce that correctly? She came to the Netherlands when she was fourteen, first to Eindhoven, then to Leeuwarden, where she was too fast for the local track club, and now she's found us. As you'll see, she is very, very talented. Oh,

and she's also a student of nursing science at the university hospital, so we have someone on hand should anyone get injured. Welcome to the team."

Everyone shook hands.

"Okay, Jip," Eddy said. "You're not the only ponytail anymore."

During the form drills in pairs, Jip and Saffira ended up together. Jip was taller and probably twenty pounds heavier. Saffira moved easily, but also with a certain hesitation, as if she wasn't quite convinced the drills made sense. The main workout would be long repeats, each a little faster than the previous one. "You want to get used to the pain," Eddy said. This kind of training was Jip's specialty. She knew how to pace herself and run close to her limit, but never too fast. This time, however, she couldn't disappear inside herself the way she usually could. She was aware of Saffira's breath and the rhythm of her steps, trying to gauge how hard she was working. Jip accelerated. She wanted to find Saffira's breaking point so she could slow down generously and finish the training together. But Saffira stayed right there at her shoulder. With three more reps to go, Jip had nothing left and had to slow down. Saffira pulled up next to her, hesitated for a brief moment, and overtook her. Within seconds, she was out of reach.

While the others were trotting to the changing rooms, Jip leaned on the fence next to the track, waiting for her legs to stop shaking and her stomach to settle.

Eddy stood next to her. "You let her get to you." He had gone to the Olympics once, in 1992, but he got injured before the final, and had the tendency to reminisce about the golden age of Dutch athletics, whenever

that might have been. "I've known you for a long time, and I know you're very, very good. You're tenacious. But when I look at Saffira, I see an Olympic champion. You beat yourself today, and you know it."

Jip straightened her back, still holding on to the fence. "So what's the plan?"

"I want you to help each other. Not just as athletes. She's new to the city, and I think she had a bit of a rough past. Her mother's still in Ethiopia, her father doesn't seem to be in the picture, that kind of thing. I tried to ask, but she really doesn't want to talk about it. She needs a friend."

• • •

Biking home after dusk, Jip recognized Saffira in the distance and sped up to catch her. Saffira's bike was too big for her. It was a men's bike with a rusty frame, and someone had painted BEAST on the crossbar in red letters.

"Great bike," Jip said.

"Thanks." Saffira wore a parka and a knitted green cap. Her steering was a little clumsy.

"It doesn't have lights, though. You need lights when you bike in the dark. If the police catch you, you have to pay a fine. It's super annoying. They got me twice, so I bought these clip-ons. Want to borrow them?"

"The police?"

"Not the police-police. It's no big deal." Jip forced herself to speak slowly. "I was just offering...Never mind." She couldn't bring herself to repeat the bit about the clip-on lights. It just didn't seem worth it. "So, where

do you live?" she said after a while.

"Paddepoel."

"Nice. I live close to Wouter's place. Did he tell you we're having dinner there?"

"Yes. I'm on my way."

"Good. It's a regular thing. It's our way to celebrate we survived training."

• • •

Wouter lived in a former villa that had been split into small apartments for the city's increasingly numerous students. There was a party on the first floor. People were screaming and laughing and dancing to Kung-Fu Fighting. A girl in a chef's hat was roasting walnuts in a large pan in the kitchen, beer bottles and wine bottles and a kitschy hookah were arranged on the couch table just so, and a group of people in cheap princess dresses were playing a board game using pieces of chocolate.

Wouter lived in the attic, in a small room with a hot plate, a toaster-oven, and a half-sized fridge that served as a night table. When Jip and Saffira arrived, he was cooking spaghetti, barely able to stand upright under the slanted roof. Jelle and Menno were sitting on the bed. The water was boiling, and condensation covered the single small window.

Wouter pulled a beanbag from under the bed. "Here you go. Have a seat."

Saffira sat down, unzipped her jacket and took off her cap. Jip sat

on the bed between Wouter and Menno.

"Saffira beat you up pretty good," Menno said.

"She sure did," Jip said. "I'm hungry."

Wouter handed out bowls of pasta and then walked around with the saucepan and a bowl of grated cheese and served everyone in turn. He ate standing up, leaning against his desk. "So, did you ever meet any of the greats?" he asked Saffira. "Bekele, or the Dibabas?"

"No. I never used to run in Ethiopia. Only here."

"What's your favorite distance?" Wouter asked.

Saffira stirred her pasta. "I like the 1500. It's the right distance. Not too...long."

"Oh, it can be long," Jip said. "I was running an 800 once, in Belgium, I think, European Juniors, and they sold frites right next to the track. You ran past, and you were literally running through a mist of grease. All I could think was, thank God I'm not running the 1500."

The others added memories of their best races and their worst, and then started talking about their goals for the season ahead.

"I want to break my PR in the 5000," Wouter said. "It's time."

"I want to win Nationals," said Jelle. "That's right, I put it out there."

"Fair enough, because I'll beat you," said Menno.

"I just want to stay injury-free," Jip said.

"What about you?" Wouter asked Saffira. He now sat on the floor opposite her, his crossed arms on his knees.

"I want to run the 1500 in under four minutes."

"Okay," said Wouter. "That's going to be fun."

"Eddy said I can do it."

Jip said nothing. The 1500 in under four minutes—it was the kind of goal she used to have as a schoolgirl. Saffira probably thought it was a modest goal.

When the others were gone, Jip stayed behind and helped Wouter clean up the kitchen. "I feel like spending the night."

"I was hoping you would."

They had started spending the night about a year ago. Wouter was twenty-two, four years younger than she was. He was the age Jip had been when she'd run her PB.

"I don't know about Saffira," Jip said when they were almost asleep. "Eddy wants me to be her friend."

"So be her friend. She seems nice."

• • •

Jip and Saffira agreed to meet at a café in the shopping district. Jip ordered a cappuccino and a slice of banana bread, Saffira had a cup of tea. Jip mentioned a play—a dance, really, inside an inflatable tent at the Noorderzon festival, it was about the human subconscious, but also about men trying to control women. Really beautiful. Saffira nodded and stirred her tea. Jip remembered that Saffira was a student, too. Wasn't the new library website a joke? Yes, Saffira agreed: it was confusing, and the library itself was poorly

stocked. With effort, they kept talking until Jip had finished her meal, then they went to Jip's favorite store. Saffira touched the garments with fascination, as if she couldn't believe someone would pay money for them. She always wore jeans and a sweater. Jip put the clothes she had wanted to try on back on the rack and said she was out of money for the month, anyway.

"So what do you want to do?" Jip asked when they were back on the street.

"I need some vegetables," Saffira said. The market was crowded, but Saffira darted from one stall to the next, and put the bags of beans, carrots, and potatoes into her backpack. The vendors greeted her; some had already put aside a bag with her stuff. Her final stop was the soup wagon. The old woman poured chicken stock into a container Saffira gave her and gestured at Saffira's hair with comments in a language Jip didn't understand. She sounded disapproving. Saffira handed the container to Jip while she put the change in her wallet. The dull yellow chicken stock was still warm, with pieces of carrot, onion, and herbs.

"For after running," Saffira said. "With a loaf of bread."

"What did the woman say to you? She sounded upset."

"I know her from back home. Every time she sees me, she tells me I should wear a headscarf. If I don't, I'm a bad Muslim."

Jip handed back the container. "I didn't know you were a Muslim."

"You see? I'm a bad one. The headscarf bothers me when I run, so I don't wear it at all. Maybe later."

They were weaving through the crowd to where Saffira had chained her bike.

"I don't see how it makes you a bad Muslim," Jip said. "It's only a piece of cloth."

"It's about more than that. It's about what I do. My mother is Muslim, too. If she saw me running, she wouldn't like it. She would say, help others. Be kind. Do something useful with your life. Running isn't useful. I do it only for me. To win."

Jip felt there was a counterargument, but she couldn't find the words. "I think I know what you mean."

"So there. We're both bad."

Saffira put her groceries in a crate attached to her bike's handlebars. The crate hadn't been there the other day.

"Now you have a real Dutch bike," Jip said.

"Yes, it's very handy," Saffira said. "Wouter made it for me."

• • •

Wouter was cleaning his fridge with Windex and a brush. "I gave her bike an upgrade. And I think she's cute. That's all."

"You obviously have no issues with her being a teammate."

"None." He sprayed more Windex into the fridge. "Look, I know this isn't about me. Ever since she arrived, you extended your claws. It's only natural. You're both athletes." He put down the brush and reached for a towel to wipe out the fridge. "I think it's stupid that Eddy asked you to be

her friend because, you know. You're both girls!" He raised his hands in a fake Oh my God gesture. "I asked her to come to the *intocht* tomorrow."

"The arrival of Sinterklaas? You're kidding."

"You're worried she'll think it's racist?"

"It is racist."

"So? It will be all over town. She won't be able to ignore it, anyway. And if she's pissed off, we can all talk about it. That's good, isn't it?"

• • •

As always, Sint would arrive by ship. Families with young kids were lining the canal despite the cold rain, the children in Piet and Sint costumes too excited to feel the cold, the parents shivering in their rain jackets. The ships carried mountains of cardboard presents and they flew the Spanish flag, because Sinterklaas lives in Spain. Jip couldn't help feeling a little festive, remembering the years when she had believed that good Sint was traveling from house to house at night to leave presents in the shoes of the children who had been "good." Before bedtime, she and her sisters put apples in their shoes and sang songs together, and in the morning the apple would be replaced by candy or chocolate or a small toy. Finally, on the night of December fifth, a heavy knock would come at the door; no one would be there, but a bag with presents would be on the doorstep, sometimes under a thin layer of fresh snow...

But now at the canal, Jip felt ashamed. On the ships, next to the brass bands and the choirs singing the songs she remembered from her

youth, were the Zwarte Pieten, the "black Petes" – Sinterklaas's helpers. Jip watched them wave and somersault and hang from the ropes with their curly wigs and their painted red lips and black faces. After a while, she dared to look at Saffira, who observed everything with a neutral expression. A group of Pieten was canoeing down the canal, zigzagging between ships and handing out crayons. "I know these guys!" Wouter called. "Hey! Over here!"

"That must look pretty strange to you," Jip said to Saffira.

"I've been living here for a while. I know it is part of Dutch culture."

• • •

Wouter was right: Jip and Saffira were not meant to be friends; they were rivals. They didn't try to go shopping anymore. Sometimes, they all went out as a team. When they went to a bar, Saffira wore boots and a leather jacket, even a shade of make-up. Wouter started to leave when she did, and sometimes the two of them arrived at the track together. The easy and consistent tone in which both of them denied being more than friends told Jip all she needed to know.

"Congratulations," she once said to Saffira when they were in the dressing room, getting ready for a hot shower after a very long training session. "Wouter's a nice guy." She said it in the voice in which she used to congratulate competitors for winning a race early in the season. Saffira appeared not to understand, and Jip wanted to say something else to coax

a confession from her, but right then she thought she noticed scars around Saffira's wrist—silver bands of tissue, as if she had been tied up. Jip wasn't sure she had really seen this; it was dark, after all, and Saffira squeamishly turned away to continue undressing.

• • •

Their communication was as easy on the track as it was awkward in real life. Jip took the lead, and Saffira followed her pace. They pretended to be evenly matched, and waited for the day when they would have to race each other. They knew it was coming.

• • •

At the beginning of the new year, Eddy took Jip and Saffira to the clubhouse next to the track to discuss their goals for the season. "You two are working together beautifully. You're going to run fast times this summer. But be patient—Amsterdam is only next year." He was referring to the world championships. "I think you can both qualify next year—if you play it smart this year. Run fast times, yes, but above all: stay healthy."

"Sounds good," Jip said. Saffira drank orange juice through a straw.

"I want both of you to race at a bunch of smaller meets in the spring, Lisse and Hoorn. Just to test the waters. I want you to work together, and make sure the race is fast. The faster you run, the stronger your case

with the selectors next year."

"Got it," Jip said.

"Our goal race this year is at the FBK Games in Hengelo. There's going to be a strong international field. You can kill each other in that race, but not before that. Okay?"

After Saffira left, Eddy opened a plastic bottle of water and drank half of it in one gulp. "There's another reason I'm asking you to work together," he told Jip. "I've been talking to some of Saffira's old coaches from back when she was a teenager. Her tactics are bad, really bad. Either she keeps it late and gets stuck in traffic, or she's going out too fast and crashes at the end. Not that she isn't good enough to win anyway. And that's part of the problem. She never had anyone challenge her."

"Now she has me."

"Yes." Eddy finished his water. "Now she has you."

"You don't want me to race her. You want me to teach her."

"She needs to learn how to pace herself."

"Be honest with me," Jip said. "Do you think we can both qualify for Worlds? Or do you want to use me to get her there? Is she even a citizen?"

"She's been here legally for years."

"That's not what I asked."

"If she shows promise this year, the Athletics Federation will file a request to expedite her citizenship application. And by showing promise, I mean good enough for a medal. That's the standard these days."

"So. And what if I'm better than her?"

"Then you're better." Eddy closed the bottle and put it in his backpack. "You asked me to be honest. With the funding for athletes the way it is, we'll probably be lucky if the federation sends one distance runner to Worlds. And if that's the case, I hope it's her."

"Okay."

"It's not because she's the better talent. It's because not too long ago, you didn't care anymore. You missed training, you had all these excuses, then you started grad school. It's a natural process, believe me. I've seen it before. And now, all of a sudden—"

"In other words, she's the poor refugee, and I always had everything, so the least I can do is pace her to some fast times and make sure she goes to Worlds. And I go back to grad school. In short, I should let her win."

"Look, I'm an athlete too. Asking you to let her win would be bullshit."

"That's right. It is bullshit. And she would agree."

• • •

Their first race was in Lisse, in May. The few spectators were mostly friends and family of the athletes, and reporters from the local paper. It was cool and windy. Saffira, in long pants and a long-sleeved jacket, hugged herself and frowned. "Come on," Eddy said. "Some strides to warm up." Jip's legs felt sluggish, as if she'd had mild anesthesia. After the first set, Saffira sat

down next to her bag, took out a textbook, and started to read.

"You think that's a good idea?" Jip said.

"It's too cold to run fast, anyway."

The meet organizers had hired a pacesetter, a former 800m runner from Lithuania. She hit the splits perfectly, and when she dropped out with 1.5 laps to go, Jip took over the lead. She tried to speed up, but the track felt magnetic and her legs made of iron. She wished Saffira would take over for a bit, but Saffira was hovering just behind. Then, as they were approaching the finish line, she overtook Jip and won easily. Instead of celebrating, she looked at her watch and walked away.

The sun came out as they were cooling down running through the streets.

"That wasn't so bad," Jip said.

"It was slow. I have no speed at all."

"We got the first one out of the way. The time was okay for a rust buster," Eddy said.

Saffira had her jacket on again and pulled up her zipper. "The time was bad."

"If you thought it was too slow, you could have taken the lead," Jip said.

• • •

Two weeks later, it was raining in Hoorn, and the wind was even stronger than it had been in Lisse. But training had been going well, and now that

Jip had raced on the track again, she remembered how it felt: the queasiness and dry mouth, the contained aggression of lacing up the spikes, the desire to stride up and down her lane and roll her shoulders, even spit in the grass the way sprinters did. Saffira seemed different, too: no books this time, and her running shorts and black top looked like business. They had a greed on a new strategy: Eddy had told them to switch the lead. It would be more fair, and good for both of them.

The starting gun went off. The track was slippery, and the few remaining spectators were hiding under umbrellas they had to hold with both hands. Jip ran in front; there was no pace setter this time. She squeezed her eyes shut against the rain, imagined the water steaming off her face. She ran faster than in Lisse, her sluggishness gone. Her clothes were so wet she didn't feel them anymore. Despite the weather, the spectators were cheering. About halfway through the race, Jip felt lightheaded and signaled for Saffira to take over, but Saffira stayed right behind her. So much for working together. Jip started to slip off the pace, still light-headed, flailing. But she had dealt with this before, and knew better than to panic. Still in the lead, she settled into a slower pace that would bring her home in good form: knees up, chest out. Finish with pride. But in the final curve, someone was next to her, challenging her – Saffira, of course, doing her usual trick of sprinting past her in the final meters. Jip moved to the outside of her lane to make it harder to pass, and stuck out her elbow. She hit Saffira's arm, the two tangled, and Saffira held on to her. Jip tore her arm out of Saffira's grasp, heard her fall down, and sprinted ahead to the finish.

When Jip turned around, she saw Saffira lying on the track clutching her knee. Officials and a medic hurried towards her with blankets. Jip waited for an official to tell her she was disqualified, but nothing happened. Eddy ran up to her. "I told you to work together."

"She didn't stick to the plan."

"So you decided to trip her?"

"I just made it tough for her to pass me. I didn't want her to fall."

The officials carried Saffira away on a stretcher.

"I should probably check on her." Eddy loosened his scarf. "When I told you to help each other, I really thought I wasn't asking a lot."

They drove home together in Eddy's car. The doctor had told them Saffira's knee was probably fine, but that she should go to the hospital the next day for some tests. Saffira pulled up the hood of her sweater and listened to a podcast. The bandage was so thick she couldn't bend her knee.

Eddy dropped both of them off at Saffira's place, where Jip had left her bike. Saffira picked up her bag and limped a few steps.

"Let me get that for you," Jip said. Saffira let her take it and unlocked the front door. She had dark rings under her eyes.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"It's fine."

Saffira's apartment had one room and a closet-sized kitchen, white walls and a tile floor. A travel closet stood against the wall, and a single mattress lay on the floor, blankets neatly folded. A small table with two chairs stood in front of the window, and a bright green IKEA teapot (Jip had the

same one) sat on the table. A large tapestry hung on the wall above the mattress, showing a mosque in a garden. The walls of the mosque were also white: warm white in the sun, dark white in the shade, its roof patina green, the sky blue with fluffy clouds, the earth burned clay, and all of it framed by a braid of little golden, red and orange flames.

"It's beautiful," Jip said.

"It's from home," Saffira said. "It's the only thing I took."

Jip put Saffira's bag down next to the mattress, and Saffira sat at the table and carefully felt her bandaged knee. "I hope it's not serious."

"I'm really sorry," Jip said.

"It's okay. It's part of the sport."

"Why didn't you stick to the plan? I signaled you."

"I don't remember a plan." She got up and put her jacket in a laundry bag. "Sometimes I find it hard to understand Dutch. It's a confusing language."

"You speak it very well." Jip turned to the tapestry. "So you took this with you."

"My mother gave it to me. We had to pack in a hurry. She wanted me to be safe."

Eddy had told her Saffira didn't want to talk about this. She was probably hearing more now than Eddy ever had. "You must miss her."

"Yes, sometimes. But I have a great life now."

"If you make it to Worlds, you'll be on TV. Your mother will see you."

"She won't like it."

"Come on. She'll be happy to see you. She'll be insanely proud."

"Of course she'll be happy to see me," Saffira said, as if Jip had said something unbearably self-evident, which of course she had. "But she won't approve of what I do."

Jip's mother had driven her to competitions, cheered for her when she won and consoled her when she lost, kept track of her results in a leather-bound notebook, and baked pancakes to take along to the track. But there had been moments when Jip had done things that in the eyes of her mother had been reckless or selfish: stayed up late at places her parents didn't know, hitched rides with strangers, jumped into the lake at night from the same pier as this boy who had hit a shallow spot and broken his spine. In her defense, Jip brought up the trophies she'd won, her good grades, and her common sense; she said she'd be fine, she could take care of herself. Her mother let her talk. The she said, "I love you, but that doesn't mean I approve."

"I think I know what you mean," she said to Saffira. "A little."

• • •

A MONTH LATER, in June, Jip and Saffira stood at the starting line of the women's 1500 meter run at the FBK Games in Hengelo. The weather was finally perfect: a cool blue sky, sunshine, no wind. Jip was in great shape, better than during the miraculous summer four years ago. If she lost today, it would be because she made a mistake. Saffira stood next to her. Jip no-

ticed a scar on her knee. She had slicked back her hair and twirled it into a tight bun and jumped nervously in place.

A few steps into the race, Jip knew her good shape would hold. She felt her strength in every muscle, and in every effortless grip-and-push of her toes. Some of the other runners in the field were faster on paper, and Saffira would be right there at the end, but Jip could win this. It would be the best win of her career. She didn't think further ahead than that.

Jip tucked in behind the two pacers. The pace was fast, the other runners striding in formation around her. A couple of suits stood next to the finish line; Eddy had said they were scouts for Worlds next year. Screw them.

Saffira was on her outside, running much too wide in her inexperience. Good. She's wasting energy.

After 800 meters, the stadium announcer called out a time, and the audience cheered: they were on pace to break four minutes. The pacers dropped out and Jip took the lead, Saffira still on her outside. She waited for the pack to swallow her, but it didn't happen—the pace was too fast. She just had to hold on. This was the race she had dreamed about four years ago, in this big stadium filled with fans, all of them surprised to see a Dutch girl in the lead. She heard the announcer say her name, and the public cheered, all of them for her. Three hundred meters to the finish, two hundred, and she was still leading. Spit ran down her chin, and she remembered what Eddy said: Relax your facial muscles as if you're asleep, it really helps. She felt the emptiness, the lack of presence at her shoulder, and it felt wrong,

disorienting. Where was Saffira? She slowed down—only a notch, a blink, nothing anyone would notice—and there she was. Saffira. Beside her. They were sprinting side by side now. *Shit*, Jip groaned out loud. Dumb! She threw herself at the finish line.

As they waited for the finish photo, Jip and Saffira were walking around the track. Jip didn't know what she wanted the result to be. Her throat hurt; maybe she was getting a cold. She felt pain in her legs she thought would never be as bad again in her life. No matter the outcome, she had done her best. She had shown all she had to show.

Saffira stood on the grass, her hands on her hips, still gasping. The time finally showed up on the results table, but without a name next to it: 4:01:43. The officials huddled over the computer; the difference between the top two would come down to thousandths of a second. Jip smiled—even if she got second, she had run a PR by three seconds. Not bad for someone who, just months ago, had been almost retired. Saffira, on the other hand, lowered her head. She had hoped for more.

Then Jip knew which result she wanted. She walked up to Saffira and put her hand on her shoulder. "I hope you get it."

Brooke Wonders

Fire Signs

MY BOYFRIEND ROB loved the parched desert state of his childhood. I love Arizona too, but love isn't water, or the red streak of aerial flame retardant, or a morning without wind. In 2005, the year Rob killed himself, 66,000 wildfires immolated over 8 million acres of land in the United States. In Arizona alone, we survived four thousand out-of-control fires.

On our first date, Rob and I drove to Oak Creek Brewery in Sedona, AZ. Yo-yoing our way down switchbacks from mountainous Flagstaff into the valley, we passed a fire-warning sign with color-coded threat levels: yellow for moderate, orange for elevated, and red for high. He was 28; I was 22. He carried a gun and a degree in criminal justice; I carried a pocket notebook and a degree in creative writing. In the dryness of a late September heat wave, June's monsoons nothing but the memory of petrichor, I know before the sign comes fully into view that the arrow points red.

Rob's pack of American Spirits sits on the console between us. He nods at the sign as we blur by: "I don't smoke and drive," he says. "Fucking idiots keep burning down the forest." Implied: and I'm no idiot. I don't smoke yet, but I will. I don't love him yet, but I will. Nothing has yet caught fire in this lush valley, but it will. We round a switchback, and the arrow and its warning disappear from our rearview mirror.

I grew up in Flagstaff, AZ, a town built on volcanic rock. Rob grew up in Payson, a town built on the rim of a plateau—the Mogollon Rim, southern edge of the Colorado Plateau. When Rob first told me his plan, it went like this: "When my dad's dead and my mom finally goes, I'm going up on the Rim to the edge of the world. I'm going to watch one last sunrise, and then I'm going to shoot myself in the head." He failed to execute the particulars, but succeeded in the main: Sunrise. Gun. The end of the world.

In the summer, I bag pine needles and hacksaw low-hanging tree limbs, moving brush and branches away from our house. The most recent fire threatened my grandmother's home. Her neighbors wet down their shingled roof with a garden hose. On the Internet, I follow the weather, watching wind speeds rise and fall: 30 miles per hour is too high. Flames love strong wind; it's how they trap firefighters. People die by the unexpected, when shifting winds turn deadly. A popular summer activity in Flagstaff: getting up on someone's rooftop with beer, beach towels, and binoculars to watch the latest disaster. It's terribly beautiful when the planes drop fire retardant on a burn. The orange flames like jaws full of bloody teeth opening wide as the plane dives to loose a powdery fog on the inferno licking up from below.

Soon after Sedona, Rob took me to Payson to meet his parents. Frogs lined the walkway leading up to the front door. Large, small; plastic, ceramic; green, brown, hot pink and bright red; posed sitting with legs folded beneath, or poised mid-leap; a veritable Biblical plague. "Welcome!" said

his mother. "Sorry about all these. I don't know who started it; someone gave me one once, and now everyone buys them for me." She ushered us in. The living room: also frog decor. The blanket hanging over the couch featured an appliqued amphibian. Frogs dangled from the brass light fixtures. Rob shook his head, hugged his mother, did not bring her a frog. Should I have brought a frog? "It was funny at first but I'm sick of them," his mother confided.

Spadefoot frogs inhabit much of Arizona, especially Mogollon Rim country. Like all southwestern frog species, they are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Along with rapid groundwater depletion, climate change's most devastating effects on the region include the increased incidence and severity of forest fires.

Rob had bleached his black-brown hair blonde for Halloween; he'd be dressing up as Spike from Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I'd dyed my hair fire-engine red, as I was cast as Columbia in a benefit performance of the Rocky Horror Picture Show, all proceeds going to the community theater where we'd met. "Ketchup and Mustard," his father joked. "Get a load of these two. Which one's the bad influence?"

His mother's name is Nancy, same as my mother. His father's name was Don, like the verb. On the drive from Flagstaff to Payson, Rob railed against his dad, an artist who couldn't pay the bills, yet had insisted Nancy quit her nursing job in order to raise kids. Now, Don suffered severe health complications from diabetes, and Nancy served as his full-time nurse. "Watch what Dad eats," Rob told me. "He'll want to take us out to

dinner even though he can't afford it, and then he'll order a steak and every carb on the menu. I'm amazed he's not dead yet." Don would outlive his son by only six months.

Shortly after we arrived in Payson, Don gave me a tour of the garage that was his studio. He spent much of each day holed up in that garage, painting miniature desert scenes onto polished geodes. I marveled over the intricate paintings. In one, a tiny covered wagon rumbled over a cacti-pocked landscape. On second glance, I realized the landscape wasn't painted: that rutted ground? Was actually an agate striation. To my left, a roadrunner darted across jasper grassland. On my right, a quail guided her young around a barite outcropping. Don's art was genuinely beautiful. Arizona kitsch, yes, but also clever, and wonderfully executed.

Rob's dad toured the state throughout the year as part of the street festival scene, hand-selling his rock art. Don's favorite festival: the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, where he'd buy a year's worth of purple-veined geodes at rock-bottom prices. We bonded over this, as I'd covered the Show while a reporter at the university newspaper. Rob darted around the studio, cheery and animated. "This is my favorite," he said, pointing to a fluorite sphere resting on its plinth. From far away it resembled a glorified bowling ball, but closer inspection revealed an elaborate forest scene layered onto its green-brown-blue whorls. Deer chased one another around the globe. Tall pines cast their stalactite shadows. Bears splashed fish out of the creek's crystal waters.

Once we'd left the studio, Rob's stoked anger blazed up again:

"He promised to set aside a few pieces for my brother and me, but every time money got tight, he'd sell one or two. Now there's nothing left, and he's basically blind. Nothing he showed you is recent. He's already sold that globe." I'd always wondered why, despite his passion for acting, he'd pursued a criminal justice degree. By his senior year at Northern Arizona University, he'd become disillusioned with racist, sexist, quota-based policing and decided to keep on full-time at the grocery store where he'd worked since age 18, stocking the dairy aisle with milk and eggs. After meeting his family, I understood. Stability. Avoidance of frivolous artistic pursuits. To become the kind of guy who could support his partner's working life rather than feeling threatened by it. To not become his father.

Rob and I spent the night in separate rooms. In the morning, we joined Nancy on the back porch. Their backyard was dotted with birdfeeders full to bursting, and on the ground she'd unfurled a black garbage bag, atop of which sat a mountain of birdseed, three apple cores perched at its peak like cherries on a sundae. Together, we waited for wildlife. The squirrels arrived immediately, Nancy's careful mound scattered across the yard in seconds as the tuft-eared invaders tumbled over one another to get at the apple cores. She had to do this, Nancy informed us, or the squirrels would ransack the birdfeeders until there was nothing left. The garbage bag made for ease of cleanup.

"After Rodeo-Chediski, the wind carried so much debris into town, I had to wake up early and sweep off the birdfeeders. It was like winter in July. Ash piled so high the birds couldn't find their food," Nancy said.

"Your father's eyes have gotten worse. I'm glad Don can't see what the fire's done."

"Want to see the burn?" Rob asked me.

We'd passed some of the damage on the drive into town, the charred landscape a reminder of human carelessness, but there wasn't much else to do in Payson, so I said sure, and so we went.

Rob told me a story once, from before I ever met him. A family squabble, everyone arguing over Don's health. Once his father's vision had begun to deteriorate, Rob, as the eldest son, drove his family everywhere. Everyone crammed into Rob's Subaru, heading out to a restaurant for Christmas dinner: mother, father, brother, grandmother. They wouldn't stop fighting, so Rob started speeding. 90. 100. 110. Only the car shuddering fit to shatter made them shut up. He let them sit in terrified silence for a solid minute before easing up on the accelerator.

I can't get this story out of my head as we wind our way down dirt roads toward where Rodeo-Chediski swept through. Until the 2011 Wallow fire, Rodeo-Chediski held the record for most destructive in state history. It began on the Fort Apache Reservation, when Leonard Gregg, an out-of-work firefighter, turned arsonist. He knew conditions were dry. He knew a poorly drowned campfire or a lit cigarette thrown from a car window meant a steady paycheck. By the time Gregg's bad idea was contained, Arizona had lost 50,000 acres of desert. Thirty thousand people were evacuated. But 4,500 firefighters, including Gregg, were employed.

Rounding a dusty curve, we cross a black line and leave the living

forest. A charred ring encircles every dead tree. The red dirt scarred from fire looks like the pitted surface of the moon, bloodied, alien and unrecognizable. I can't look, and I can't look away, knowing that every summer arrives hotter and drier than the last. I picture conflagration tearing blind across scrubland, destroying all it touches.

*The risk factors for wildfire are many. These factors include weather, topography, and fuel. Of these, the only factor we can change is fuel. If we want to increase survivability, our greatest opportunity lies in changing the fuel available for burning. Some of the fuel characteristics we want to change include: amount (less fuel is better), continuity (fuels should be widely separated rather than packed tight), and location (fuels should be kept far away from people, homes, and property). Wildfires will be less likely to start, burn more slowly, burn cooler, and burn for a shorter length of time. The most common wildfire threat is burning embers. If conditions are right, pieces of burning material such as shrub branches, pinecones, and wood shake from a burning roof can be lofted in the air and transported more than a mile from the actual fire. (*Adapted from a Bureau of Land Management/National Park Services manual on wildfire prevention.)

A suicide is like a wildfire. I test the simile, but it collapses, an uninhabitable structure. Suicide is a wildfire. Metaphor is sturdier, metal-clad, more likely to survive when exposed to extreme conditions.

The risk factors for suicidal behavior are many. These factors often occur alongside disorders like depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and psychosis. Sometimes suicidal behavior is triggered by events such as personal loss or vio-

*lence. In order to be able to detect those at risk, it is crucial that we understand the role of long-term factors such as experiences in childhood, and immediate factors like recent life events. Suicide prevention programs promote interventions: for example, research shows that mental and substance abuse disorders are risk factors for suicide. Many programs focus on treating these disorders in addition to addressing suicide risk. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy can help people learn new ways of dealing with stressful experiences by training them to consider alternative actions when thoughts of suicide arise. Being exposed to others' suicidal behavior is another major risk factor. (*Adapted from National Institute of Mental Health information on suicide prevention.)

I can't imagine fighting fire. Smoke stinging your eyes, tongue coated in ash, air so hot it's like breathing inside a furnace. The certainty that what rages toward you means to kill you. I can't imagine being so full of burning that you'd terrorize your family. His untreated depression impersonal as a cigarette butt tossed from a car window, deadly ember coming to rest where forest meets shoulder. Rob drove down Woody Mountain Road until the sun was nearly up. That same road, had he continued on, would have taken him to Mogollon Rim's edge. Instead, he stopped at a golf course. Walked onto a sandtrap, one set of tracks in, none out. Put down plastic bags, for ease of cleanup. The gun in his hand, the barrel in his mouth, its metal cold and literal. I can't imagine what he thought, felt, as he lit the match. The sunrise bursting over the horizon all pink and gold and reddest red, a warning he ignored. I can't imagine it.

In 2006, the Brins Mesa Fire destroyed 4,000 acres in and around

Oak Creek Canyon and Sedona. The landscape was dotted with smoking holes where the deep roots of Ponderosa pines continued burning for weeks after the fire had been contained. In 2006, I worked part-time at a New Age magazine editing the words of people who believed that aliens, religious figures, and otherworldly beings spoke through them. Rob's death razed my life down to the ground, nothing left but red dirt and ash.

The 2010 Schultz Fire burned 23 square miles on Schultz Peak and San Francisco Mountain, both part of the mountain range crowning the city of Flagstaff. When the monsoons came, mudslides swept through, destroying homes, as the wounded forest could no longer protect the mountain from erosion. In 2010 I was living in Chicago, working on a PhD in creative nonfiction; my research focused on trauma theory, memoir, and memory. I'd been accepted based on a series of unpublished essays about Rob. I promised myself, and my PhD program, that I'd write a memoir about his suicide.

The Wallow Fire of 2011 burned 841 square miles of the Apache National Forest. Instead of writing a memoir, in 2011 I wrote a horror story about two children who have lost their firefighter father to an unexpected turning of the wind. The children are visited by a jackrabbit that grows in size proportionate to their grief, which they neither understand nor acknowledge. At the story's end, the rabbit is the size of a house. The children curl up inside its massive ears and hold one another. They do not cry.

In 2016, Flagstaff is plagued by an unknown arsonist. I'm married

to a fiction writer, and he believes me when I tell him it's time to finish the memoir. I've completed my PhD, but I defended a dissertation comprised of allegorical short stories—including the one about the jackrabbit—rather than the promised memoir. I find I can write about Rob only via metaphor. My husband tells me to be brave and write about the thing itself rather than concealing it in smoke and flame.

We drink Arizona-brewed beers in a highly flammable building. The Commerce bar sits on an alley that opens onto historic Route 66, the road that made Flagstaff famous. My hometown has burned to the ground not once but twice; a single structure predates 1888, the year of Flagstaff's last total loss. I've spent a decade running away from this town, its threat level always red, the place where my 23-year-old self went up in smoke. "I can't finish one lousy essay, let alone a memoir," I say.

"I know it's hard, but you have no choice. Unless you want to stay trapped, telling the same story over and over," he says, and he's right. I can write about teaching in Iowa, eating in Chicago, and hiking in the Grand Canyon; I can write about talking houses, daughterless witches, and giant jackrabbits, but always I'm still writing about Rob. My beer tastes sour. Flagstaff's arsonist is still at large.

"Look up," my husband says, pointing. On the wall hangs a painting of the exact building we're sitting in. "There's your ending."

The Commerce is in flames. Customers pour into the street, clogging the exit in their desperation to escape.

I stare at the painting until it blurs. Everything in me wants to flee this burning building. Instead, my husband and I sit and talk—about allegory, and smoking, and feeling robbed—until closing time.

NOTES

Smith, Ed, et al. "Chapter 8: Fire Mitigation Practices." *Living with Wildfire in Arizona: A Fire Ecology Guide to Arizona Ecosystems and Firewise Concepts*. Arizona Firewise, pp. 111-145.

"Suicide Prevention." *National Institute of Mental Health*. National Institutes of Health. Apr. 2015. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml.

Zackary Medlin

When I Say I Miss the Drugs

- Winner: Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry -

I mean I miss them like the holes in my gums
where they took my teeth. I tongued the stitches,
those spiders skittering through me. Taste of iron
like waves breaking themselves against basalt cliffs
cutting into a sea. My shores ache in the spray.
I miss them like coral nights lustering against us
in the bioluminescent glow released from the bacteria
seething on the surface of putrefying fish washed
onto the beach. I mean it like missing violence
on a dance floor spun into Charybdis, vortex of sweat-
scalded bodies like the Bible's boiling seas. Tinnitus
of wrath, psoriasis of need. Like missing the stars' flicker
in the constellations of silica glinting in moonlit asphalt—
how we reached for them, abrading our prodigal bodies
against the street. I thought this was about going home,
about shards of sun lacerating our flesh for want of bone.
Miss them like time ribboned out before us as roads in
a ramshackle atlas of kingdoms we've never seen.
The broken spine of a Frommer's Guide to Decay
and Razor Blades for Townies. I mean missing bands
of blue light unbraiding in the rearview, a siren's blare,
my cheek pressed to the trunk of a car. I mean it like
beads of blood, like bullets, like a loss of breath. I mean
it like scars. I mean it like how I missed all of their funerals.

Emily Jace McLaughlin

RE: FLORIDIAN GUESTHOUSE GEM—FURNISHED!

To the Landlord:

You may have felt my presence from your sidewalk, checking out the guesthouse property. I love when the seasons change in Miami. Lizards lose chlorophyll instead of trees.

In these photos of your guesthouse, I noticed a needle abandoned on the bathroom counter. I mistook it for a wrinkle in the screen and zoomed in. There it was, pure as a wedding invitation in the mailbox. I thought perhaps this needle was left by your previous tenant, the type of "right tenant (no college students)" for your "right price (wink)." Even though I am in college, I am still your right tenant. I am sure. I'm familiar with the going rates. Plus, as a full-time working student, I live at my desk. I barely exist.

I have taken some liberties here to include proof of car loan payments, two references and a voluntary sample of my English essay. I am never ashamed to take my application to the next level. I've never had anything to lose.

About the car loan payments and writing sample: I am paying off a used Saab. In English Composition, I wrote a paper about my Saab. The professor spent a full period rationalizing not only why she was assigning

this paper, but why she was employed by a community college. Personal narratives, she called the papers. The exercise: to view the people in your life as characters. Form hypotheses, imagine what that person-character was secretly feeling. I raised my hand. "When you make assumptions, you make an A-S-S of yourself, get it?" I said. The professor chewed her gum once more, said, "It's fine. Whatever," all, like, grow the F up, but now that I recount the look, it was an expression of concern.

Anyway, where is this chick going with this? you're probably thinking. I've clipped an excerpt to help you hypothesize about the "right tenant" behind this response to your ad:

English Composition Personal Narrative

Title

I did not speak to my dad in high school. He left me with my mother. I got her into rehab where all she had to worry about was what visitors would come more than once, for me to sneak her shampoo bottles and mouthwash, so she could suck out the alcohol. I was supposed to stay with my brother Rusty, but preferred staying in my mom's house without her. Only when I was alone drinking could I think clearly about whether I, also, was an alcoholic. It only occurred to me to wonder this because Rusty had said alcoholics are the people at the party complaining they aren't drunk enough and can drive everyone else home.

That brownnose in class said you go to jail for having a beer cracked in the car. I told her, "It's all about the number in your blood, not the number of open cans." I'd remembered that from a D.A.R.E. skit, acted out to *Bridge Over Troubled Water.*

I never resented my circumstances. I kept sight of the one favor I had to cash in: my dad's new condo address for in-state tuition at Florida International University. FIU was the only place that accepted me, and I had to get out of my town, and fast.

Well, I lost my financial aid due to the series of bad influences.

And my dad says you sometimes have to take a step back to take two steps forward. You might say I'm fortunate Miami Dade Community accepted me as a transfer. I'd rather build my grades here and transfer to the "U." The real jobs go to those University of Miami grads, spoiled rapist pigs.

I first lived at my dad's condo in Aventura. When I traded in my Corolla for my Saab, I drove that bad boy straight to his condo.

"Look at my rims, Mitch," I'd said. He was settling fantasy football debts with the valet. "It's my new whip."

I'd assumed that my dad would be thrilled. The Saab would disguise my fuckedupness to his girlfriend, Dawn, who stormed out in her robe and the black eye from when she slammed her car door across her own face at the gas station pump.

My dad wanted to know just who did I think I was, new Saab or used Saab? If I had this extra cash, why not consolidate my loans? Why not pay him some rent? But it's not even the loan payments that bother him, or the destinations I plan to reach. It's not even that I pawned his car manual, or what he found stashed in my own glove compartment. My dad feared I'd jump a social class with my Saab, which I certainly plan to do. He told me that I need to learn self-respect, and that I could no longer use his address for in-state discounts. Dawn put her hands over my eyes and screamed. Dawn may have felt like my mom did when

I was young. We went to see *Dancing With Wolves* and my mom surprisingly insisted that I close my eyes at all the sex scenes. Now I know it wasn't the nudity she was shielding me from, but all the angles of loving a person. My dad split for Miami soon after, tattooed in my mom's teethmarks, and that's how my whole family quit at once but it always looked like my mom quit first.

"Where do all your fibs come from?" my dad went.

"Me," I said. "In here!" All I was trying to do was to get him to spit out the worst thing he thought about me, so I could picture what I was like, and get used to living as that type of person.

"Must be nice!" he screamed.

Then I sped away in my Saab because in fights the person who gives up first is usually the person making sense.

I've got to pretend I've changed until I have. He doesn't believe I'm employed as the receptionist at a methadone clinic merely to support my education. I know he doesn't really give a shit that methodone is just another drug to get hooked on, the only thing that gets heroin addicts clean. I know he doesn't really give a shit what I do as long as I have health insurance. But he said hanging with dopeheads is bound to get me hooked again. He said, "Didn't the president of AA tell you that?" I told him the founder of AA replaced drugs with sex addiction, so pick your poison, Mitch. And so what, I'm working at the clinic hoping my run-away-brother, Rusty, will show up. I still hope I'll see Rusty on some corner, shaking a can. The years spent waiting for Rusty can buy you a loaf of soda bread, though.

It's hard to visualize our family thrown-up across the country, like immigrants or rich people. I wish the toothfairy or someone told you how many chances you get, or that nobody passes through Florida to get to

another state.

I'm also interested in the impossible question: what makes an addict an addict? Is it genetic weakness? Is it nurture? Is it birth order?

Dawn said my dad and I are cut from the same cloth, which means stubborn sons-of-bitches. Sure, I'm no warm and fuzzy daughter. I didn't decorate his bathroom in flamingos like her. I do not send Valentines. But I did feed their cat, who walks like a two-timer. And I do hope people adapt to their emotions. Besides, it was hard for me to study there, in their condominium, with that relentless other-shoe-dropping feeling. I swore I'd never rely on another person. It's not that he'd bolt lock me out for real and make me sleep in the "impulse purchase" I was hell-bent on driving, it's that I don't want to owe him anything he can come to collect, the same way I called my favor in to him for that in-state tuition at FIU.

End Excerpt

My essay went on to talk about overcoming obstacles and perseverance. On the back, I jotted down bars in Kendall the teacher could meet people her age at, fishing for extra credit. When the teacher forced the class to criticize each other's papers, everyone else's ended with acceptance.

2) References:

Dawn. My stepmom Dawn is my reference. Dawn's legit. She really wants the best for people. She'll confirm that I don't lift barbells at moonrise. It's just me and I'm tiny these days. The heat has a way of stealing your appetite, saving it for later. Dawn will assure you that I don't have the

memory of the lady who leaves her shih tzu tied to the post office, then tacks *Lost Dog* flyers to telephone poles on your street. That I don't have the personality of the video store guy, who tapes a list of fine-owing neighbors to his store window.

I'd be at peace with a pool smooth as the cut of a can-opener, watching the evening sun sink through the strainer.

In psychology we learned about survival instincts of mammals, that the instinct of a fox is to diversify his habitat, to dig a den wherever he can, hiding in plain sight of his predators. A fox lurks in the thick edges of the periphery, going about their days during others' nights. I asked the instructor to differentiate why that would be an instinct rather than learned behavior, or what I thought of as street smarts. She didn't have an answer to my question and when I told her that I would be dropping the course, she expressed surprise, not in my doubt about managing her course load, but that I had been able to show up for so long.

Look, the right price in the right neighborhood can be life changing (you should see how much the other places at this price suck ass--my Saab is more inhabitable). When there's a spot for every possession, blood pressure eases.

And if I establish in-state residency, independent of my family, I can pay my bills off from one paycheck, which is (ironically) how my dad taught me to live.

I know how it feels to get bombarded by inquiries. When I collect resumes off the fax at the methadone clinic, my boss tells me to get a feel for

the person through their cover letter, to see who stands out.

I could get fired for breaching confidentiality, but if they really wanted to can me, they'd think of a hundred other reasons.

You may have already guessed it but I am the receptionist at the clinic. I monitor the nurse doing the honors every morning when you come in for your methadone. The autonomous location of my chair allows me to collect the drips from the dispenser whenever she steps away. Most days, I can squeeze at least half a dose into the plastic measuring cup I hide in my drawer.

You may have seen me planting dahoon hollies out back of the dispensary, trying to block the neighbor's view of the line of shady patients at six AM. You know how the community picketed, thinking the clinic decreases property values like a halfway house for pedophiles. The town of Kendall had never united in such force, even against the deportation of the high school's valedictorian. They weren't picturing ordinary painkillers sliding into suit pockets and maternity sweats like Willy Wonka tickets. They weren't picturing college English students responding to ads on craigslist.

That's what Bossman explained at the public hearing, that the main purpose of the clinics is not just to reduce break-ins at Home Depot, but to keep humans alive, how it costs the state something like three thousand a year to treat a patient outpatient versus thirty thousand to put the patient in jail.

Yes. I'd nodded to the nurse as we listened to our boss. Show

up for your dose, invest in one step, one daily commitment to your own story. Now that I think about your story, as a vet, our most committed patient population, I'm certain the needle in your photo was not left out by accident. I'm squeezing my hand into a fist writing this, just assuming I know the kind of right tenant you are looking for. But all I really know is that giving up H feels like giving up water forever.

The thing is, the ad for the receptionist job at the clinic also stated "no college students." I marched in there with my application, seized the boss with my eyes, explained why I was the right candidate, despite my age, how I could chase down kite strings. How I never give up.

Bossman at the dispensary. He's my second reference. He knows that I've been living out of my Saab in the clinic parking lot. He's been reassuring me that the staff sometimes needs more assistance than the patients, but any day now he'll have to call the tow company for the clinic lot. He'd be doing me a favor, he said, by forcing me to at last find a stable living arrangement.

Look, maybe I should swap my new ride back for the guestroom at my dad's. I'm not writing to solicit sympathy. I cry only in good times, like, I cried the day my dad answered that phone call about using his address for college.

So I hope I've adequately supplied answers to your questions:

1) Proof of monthly payments

2) References

3) In a few words, tell me, why do you need my guesthouse?

I know a few words will not move heaven and earth. But I thought your explanation point in the advertisement might be an overcompensation for something like loneliness, the needle left out in the bathroom might be a cry for help, a cry more indirect than this response.

So I thought I'd try this approach once more. I thought that you, more than other landlords, might get the feel for how, step-by-step, I am trying, desperately, to save my own life.

Jalina Mhyana

Laughter & Forgetting

> "Then it came, real laughter, total laughter, taking us into its immense tide. Bursts of repeated, rushing, unleashed laughter, magnificent laughter, sumptuous and mad... And we laugh out laughter to the infinity of laughter... O laughter!"
>
> - Milan Kundera

Laughter and forgetting are such gifts for the melancholic. Being in the present, no past no future. That cocksure zone of forgetting. But you can't dunk your head in the River Lethe or tickle yourself with wit. There's no masturbating a funny bone. Memories are etched at a cellular level, stubborn as mussels. So I copy Kundera and force it, faking it till I make it; mimicking joy until it comes in waves and I can't hold it back.

I want to tell you how I do it. I'm writing this with a pink pen that has seven speeds. Laughter's equal, a little wand that summons the here and now. My wrist's calligraphy is invisible under the blankets, invisible ink on my skin. My wrist hovers above a hip. Panties rolled around my shins. Sole against sole, thighs splayed in a diamond shape. This is my page. I'm writing myself toward that hedonist's wonderland, the heady intoxication of a spent body.

I undress my mind after I undress my body; have to undress the years, starting at five years old. Decades to disrobe. Distractions to discard.

Losing myself petal by petal. Pluck, pluck. Blown seed head, strip tease.

The Victorians called it a "little death," and like any death, my life passes before my eyes. My sexual life flies by in the time it takes to come; I replay decades against my will, a film reel that never snaps, little sunspots in the corners when the reel changes from continent to continent, age to age. Static and scratches in memory like an LP; the holes in the narrative pop and make these fantasies mine, and well-loved, the celluloid lengths hissing.

I go back to when I was younger, when it all started, stripping the nesting dolls of my growing body and rubbing each of them before I can be here now, rubbing my grown-up self. It's awful foreplay, but I can't avoid it. I rub my sex that's hairless, then hairy, then hairless again when I started waxing. I'm a pedophile watching my prepubescent body masturbate.

First I rub myself awkwardly, not knowing I have a clitoris. Climaxes are out of the blue at this stage, as if I've taken a step off the edge of the known world. Dragons nip at my fingers. Soon I can fall off the edge of the known world any time I wish. I can hunt the dragons a dozen different ways with star charts and astrolabes, stretch my labia back to reveal new lands.

Each time I come I fall farther. I fall through every orgasm I've ever had to get to the next one, the newest one. I know the edge of the world like the back of my hand; it is the back of my hand, blurred between my legs.

I grow thirty years younger, then grow older again, in the life of a AA battery. I can replay my life five times, give or take, before the vibrations weaken to the point where I could shake my dildo faster manually, with my

wrist. Like a coke can before the spritz, beads of sugar on the sheets.

I keep my masturbation toy in a vintage pearl clutch, a lot like the Granta magazine cover with a pink purse opened like labia. My clutch is embellished with pearls, and inside, a pinky-sized vibrating dildo. Pearls fall from the clutch when I open and close it. Tiny pearls stuck between the floorboards. It looks like I've broken a choker and pearls have fallen to my feet. Each pearl is a climax, a blindness, a way of forgetting. My purse is threadbare, maybe a couple hundred pearls left. Girls are born with all their eggs inside of them already, like moons. They open and close themselves and the pearls slip off the skin till they can't remember anything at all.

I go back to the beginning.

I'm five at the nudist park in Florida. My mom asks an older man to babysit me for the weekend. He takes me away in his sports car across Florida. We drive for hours. I'm homesick in my gut. He asks me how to spell different words. I'm proud because I just learned how to spell restaurant.

All of my masturbation fantasies begin with this molestation. I don't know why I start with horror to find release. Maybe therapy. Each time I roll down my panties I'm driven to my orgasm by this pedophile across hours of Florida, a state shaped like a handgun or a cock. He drives me to his apartment somewhere in the neon city, we say hello to his flat mate, then he removes my kimono telling me he's seen me naked a thousand times, what makes tonight any different? I grow up a little under his hands and soon I'm six or so in Hawaii. I roll out of bed across the whole Pacific

Ocean. It takes so long, it's night time again.

Fast forward, thank god, though it doesn't get much better yet.

I'm in the back seat of a drive-in porn movie, a metal box full of sighs is attached to the window ledge. My mom's hand pushes my head down so I can't see the front seat or the movie. Her moans mingle with the moans stuck to our window like fast food, like they're something we can eat. They make me hungry, like milkshakes and fries. An adult's bracelets clink, clink, clink in the front. I want to be too big to be pushed into the space in the back seat. I feel full like I have to pee and I want to eat something bigger than me.

I go forward.

I'm nine, all three of us girls are nine. In Waikiki. We're naked on my bed. The lanai is open, the drapes flutter in and out and I can see the Ala Wai Canal from where I stand, as an adult, in the back of the room. I'm standing back there watching my younger self and my two friends. Our three small bodies lay lengthwise, on our bellies, our heads at the wrong end of the bed, watching TV. On the Playboy channel, a woman is fucked by a man who sits behind her on a horse. We hand my mom's therapeutic massager back and forth.

On the TV set, the naked people are the size of dolls in a little house with an antenna rising from it. We watch the man's penis slide in and out of the woman on horseback. His cock trots in and out of her. One by one we squeeze our pelvises against the rubber nub beneath us, holding our breath, then pass the massager along like a joint, and exhale. The pleasure

swaps bodies again and again.

We're touching arms and thighs. We're a closed circuit of yearning, taking turns. One friend comes by bearing down hard, unmoving, the machine screaming beneath her contracted pelvis. The other giggles and moans as she fucks it like it's the most natural thing in the world. My hips dance and tease the tip of it, kissing lips to rim. I balance there on the head of a pin, then give in, all spasm. The bed dips with my bucking and my friends roll against me.

In my memory, I watch us on the bed, then glance at nudes on the TV. I turn away and walk the perimeter of the room, a grown woman, waiting to get older. Trying not to be aroused. As an adult masturbating, I downshift the vibrator to the slowest setting, and run it along the perimeter of my pleasure, far from my clitoris, to lessen the guilt of watching this awful scene. I won't be able to climax in a room full of nine-year-olds, even if one of them is me.

I'm counting the seconds till I can leave this vestigial fantasy. How many times have I stood in that bedroom, watching our three naked bottoms lined up like buns in a bakery? How many times have I watched that same Playboy channel show over their arched heads? At how many ages have I stood there, an adult masturbating behind them, in a corner of the room, watching them? How many heights, hairstyles, bra sizes have I worn behind them? I would never choose this fantasy. I know it's coming though; I expect it.

I could line up the houses that inhabit my memories one next to

the other, and run through them from pleasure to pain and back again. My bedroom door in Waikiki would open onto another bedroom door in the same city, but higher up in a different building. Then that balcony would lead to my boyfriend's bedroom in seventh grade, which would lead to a movie theater, and when I got back from getting popcorn, his parents would be in the aisle in front of us and soon the whole theater would turn into a car, and his parents would be driving us to my next orgasm, and so on. This is what I do; I visit my touchstones. In a scene in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the narrator fights an urge to rape his friend. He thinks, "That desire has remained with me, captive like a bird in a sack, a bird that from time to time awakens and flutters its wings."

My hummingbird thrums its wingtips above my pelvis. It hovers as fast as I tell it to. The seven speeds, patterns of pulses. Morse code. The same message/massage again and again. Dot dot dot DASH. Nonsense repeating itself, nonsense that spells out "Ha." Just that one sound tapping itself out against my pleasure: Hahahahaha. My vibrator is laughing in code. The laughter helps me forget, makes me delirious.

A necklace of nerve cells spill their pleasure the length of my spine, fizzing, drunk. This warm uncomfortable swell, like a full bladder you can only relieve by pissing. I want to piss invisibly, unendingly, clenching down and in and around my pleasure till there's nothing, just aftershocks and dribbles.

Nine again, in Florida. I'm in a junkyard with my best friend. We've come to feed her father's guard dogs. Instead of feeding them, we've

made a fort in a burned-out car. The dogs leap at us and scratch the chassis. They can smell their food inside. At my feet there's a tan purse with a long strap that tangles my foot, its contents spilled out: bright blue eyeshadow, lipstick, a broken mirror, cigarettes and a cracked lighter. We leave lip marks on her cigarettes the color of her lips, whoever she is. I wondered if she was a rape victim. Or if the car was in an accident. Her lipstick tastes of crayons.

My friend bends down and licks between my legs, her tongue against corduroy. We do this sometimes. I lay down on the long seat. The cushion bursts with apricot foam that leaves orange marks on my pants. I can't feel anything at first, till she cups my whole crotch with her mouth and sucks, and bites a little through the thick turquoise fabric. I breathe through my mouth to avoid the smell of mildew and dog food. The window is slobbered to my right, hiding us. The dog barks and clattering claws create a curtain of sound too. No one can see or hear us. I buck against my friend's head, I hold her blonde ringlets against me. I pretend I'm the woman with the eye shadow and cigarettes. I pretend I'm being raped. My purse has been ripped away, a man is sucking me. She reaches a hand up and feels for my right breast. I place her freckled hand under my sweater. I can't feel guilty, I'm being raped. If I don't come the man between my legs will open the door and let the dogs loose on me. I lean my head against the vicious slobbered window and come.

I pull my sweater down to hide my crotch while I walk home; pink lipstick in a smudged letter O. I walk until I catch the scent of hibiscus. Must be Hawaii. I'm ten. I'm in a bedroom with a different view of the Ala

Wai canal in Waikiki, this time 40 floors higher than the Playboy channel bedroom. At the Island Colony hotel. It's a big year. I play with myself in my room, remembering the massager from the year before and wishing I could find my mother's. She hid it from me after she and her boyfriend walked in on me using it. It was a forbidden fruit, just out of reach. All summer I search that apartment like a thief, for a pleasure that's inside of me.

I use anything; my hands, the bath faucet, a necklace, a sheet, anything that could rub, slide, prickle, tickle. I pinch my nipples. Pinch them, pull, tug, roll them. My nipples are sisters to my clit; reddening by proxy. They share a nerve like a bloodline and talk to each other deep inside of me. I masturbate through the memory of chopsticks in that bed; two chopsticks rub back and forth, forever, on either side of my clit that's still a mystery to me at this age, coming close to climax; my pleasure a green pea I can't quite grasp.

This isn't working. I can't write about masturbating with these tissue-white anemones here on the coffee table nodding their heads so elegantly, and this coffee press, a volume of Montaigne. I need to be less civilized if I'm to do this justice. Every time someone passes by our bay window I flinch as though I've been caught. I scramble to hide my dildo but the fake penis is just a ballpoint pen.

Hang on.

I'm in bed now, a dildo in one hand, a pen in the other. I feel like a human lie detector, scribbling my peaks and valleys. Will I fake it?

I close my eyes and the film rolls back to life. Dust motes in the projector's beam. There's so much more than just this tiny pink vibrator and its battery. There's a whole studio of memory, a big production; shelves and shelves of film reels, the labels lewd, the i's dotted with hearts. I need lightbulbs for the projector, a quiet room and a viewing screen free from day-residue detritus.

I think of Sartre's lovely description of a silent film he once watched; dust motes on the screen, one which seemed menacing to one of the actresses, who didn't notice it above her head. The dust became an actor in the drama, like my worries of the day. Conversations. Lists. Perceived slights. Bruised ego. The little roll of fat on my belly. Don't think of any of it. Push it aside. The mote falls to a bottom corner of my fantasy, and the screen flickers into a new scene.

I leave my room and end up in a parking garage on Kapiolani Boulevard, hiding behind a car, squatting. One of my first boyfriends, David, puts his dick in my mouth. He tastes of cinnamon, and my hand smells slightly of coconut sun lotion. I jerk him off with the tip in my mouth. He's just a little older than me, maybe eleven or twelve. We're virgins. "It burns!" he says, giggling, in ecstasy, grabbing the car handle behind him to stay upright. His belly is tan and taut with golden hairs. I squeeze more cinnamon onto the length of him and rub it in. "Oh god!" He grabs my head and forces himself again and again past my lips. We could get caught any minute, which makes it better. Someone could already be watching us, which makes it better still.

Cinnamon still gives me a rise. Fireball candies especially, since they're from the same time frame; little suns you put out on your tongue to awaken it. Picasso said that some artists paint yellow circles that look like the sun, and others paint suns that look like little yellow circles. I paint the sun with my tongue, till hours pass and it's as pale as the moon and it crumbles with one bite.

I remember a game show I saw on the Playboy channel around this time; there's a wall between a man and several women, with a small hole in the middle of it. He puts his cock through the hole and the female contestants suck it. It's kind of a dating show like a "bachelorette number one, what kind of music do you like?" sort of thing but with blowjobs. When I sucked my boyfriend off that summer I imagined a wall between us, that he couldn't see me. I was actually several different girls, one after the other. With the cinnamon he was a lollipop we passed to each other like a sex toy.

It still kills me, that one. All of my fantasies are mediocre and banal. In real life, divested of knee-jerk animalism, I prefer the collaborative porn between Genet and Cocteau, where two inmates jerk off in adjoining cells. They blow cigarette smoke into each other's mouths through a reed from their straw mattresses pushed through a small hole in the wall. They jerk off with a ribbon of smoke connecting them. Try as I might, I can't get off to this more poetic, stirring version. My fantasy lobe stopped developing at fourteen. When I close my eyes, I'm prepubescent.

My mother suggests I tell everyone in Waikiki I'm fifteen, because

I pass for fifteen. I don't feel so guilty masturbating through a film reel of myself at that age. That summer, the summer of ten/fifteen, after the cinnamon boy and I broke up, I had a boyfriend who was eighteen, just three years older than my pretend self, which my mom said wasn't such a big age difference. Besides, he was a millionaire and every mother wanted their daughters to date him, the prince of Waikiki. He opened his father's bar after hours so I could dance on the bar and drink from the taps.

My mind is nowhere near ready to come, though my body was ready minutes ago. I switch to low gear again and massage less sensitive areas, up to my hip bones, down the insides of my thighs. I think of *Fight Club*, porn stills spliced into movies for just a second, just a subliminal pop! My fantasies are invaded by tedium the same way, fantasy terrorism. Little snippets of things that blunt my pleasure. Anti-porn. I keep steering myself back to pleasure.

I'm still ten. My eighteen-year-old boyfriend and I are in the back row of a movie theater watching *Valley Girl* for the sixteenth time. It's my favorite movie this year. I suck on Almond Roca as my boyfriend kneels and sucks my toes in the darkness. I pretend he's not there. I'm alone in my pleasure; candy and sucking and valley girls and sexy outcast boys. I lick and scrape the chocolate off first, with my teeth, and chew the almonds. Then I suck on the naked toffee, the buttery smell, the coarseness on my tongue.

In Hawaii we don't wear shoes, our feet grow calloused. We collect all of the island on our soles. What did Ondaatje write, that a dog's paws are like a bouquet? That's how you can tell the locals from the haoles, the native

Hawaiians from the white kids visiting from the mainland. I'm so tan, I look local, "da kine." I can make poi and do Tahitian hula dances and tell the story of Queen Liliokalani and sing Hawaiian songs and my mom and I have "pidgin" conversations with words like okole, pau. My life brims with aloha. My boyfriend finds the virgin skin on my feet, between the toes, and flicks his tongue in and out of it where no land has touched. I sink in my movie theater seat, eyes glazed, toffee forgotten between lax lips.

Forward.

I'm twelve, in New England again, where we have to wear shoes in the theater. It's a Woody Allen film and my boyfriend has ripped a hole in the bottom of the popcorn container. I put my hand in and jerk him off in there, his cock a handful of butter. I'm so in love with him, for the first time. His cock so silky, and it smells faintly like the toffee in the other theater an ocean away. He puts his hand under my bubble gum pink skirt scattered with little black stars and fingers me. We become oblivious together, a machine of mutual masturbation. A curtain has been drawn inside of me, red and plush, with his hand on the velvet, caressing it. I always pretend I'm him when I play with myself, it's my cock collared with a popcorn bucket, it's my hungry girlfriend taking handfuls of me as the audience chuckles and the jokes evade me because I'm too young to understand Woody Allen but not too young to come.

My film reel is different every time. I masturbate five times to write this essay, over the course of a couple of weeks. I'm watching myself watch myself with closed eyes. Lazy memory, fallen into a rut. The neural path of

least resistance. It finds the deepest groove and falls in line every time. The groove gets deeper. A cleft. The oldest memories are the deepest, when I was the youngest, so my mind plays them over and over, the needle skipping.

I wish I could masturbate to thoughts and images that really excite me as an adult. The movie *The Pillow Book*, for example. Anything Ewan McGregor, especially him on stage in *Velvet Goldmine*, all glitter and baby oil. I always come with adult scenarios, thank god, but I have to work my way through so many years of juvenilia to get there. My foreplay fantasies are so illicit, so awful. And involuntary; like breathing or the heart beating. Involuntary come-muscle.

I'm twelve. I recently read about the Victorian practice of doctors using steam vibrators on their patients, without looking at them naked, their hands under their skirts or a blanket. Country doctors making house calls to calm housewives' hysteria. This becomes a five-star fantasy, especially when I'm the doctor making the house calls. Watching the women's faces as they come, the one highlight of their caged existences. I peel this yellow wallpaper from the archives of my mind again and again.

Thirteen. I discover an adjunct fantasy: on a show or movie there was this bit about a young male doctor having to wear a long white doctor's robe to conceal his erection while giving breast exams. I become the doctor, of course, rubbing myself under my robe with one hand while examining with the other. This has been worth its weight in gold. Though in real life I have not the slightest interest in doctors or hospitals or any of it. Or women, for that matter, oddly.

I go forward.

I'm fourteen. I'm raped in the school hallway, held down while a fourteen-year old quarterback fingers me violently, holding my arms behind me, his back against the wall, my back against his body. He's wearing a school jacket and acid wash jeans, white high top sneakers with the tongues over his cuffs. I sit splayed on the chair of his bent knees. A student walks by with a Walkman so she doesn't hear me screaming. He lets me go, laughing, and I run to safety in numbers, in the lunchroom, blending in. I'm crying. I watch him from the opposite lunch line. His friends circle his glory, his glow. He raises his hand in the air as if he's holding a trophy. He's the victor. He's the heartthrob of the school, the focus of so many girls' fantasies.

He brings his hand down to face-level and passes my smell around to each guy in turn like it's a fruit, a golden apple to prove he'd been to the garden. He's Hercules, the only one who could steal me from myself. They breathe me in and smile, and shake their heads yes, and punch him in the arm. They surround my scent in testosterone, they vie for a closer smell, they jockey for position, they close in on my sex, crazed and laughing. I watch my sex effloresce as his fingers splay like petals to let their noses in, again and again. Strange nectar. They're poised to fuck me all at once across the lunchroom. They fill their lungs with me like police dogs who'll be let off their leashes to follow that same scent and pin it down.

When I gave my virginity at thirteen, my mind stopped manufacturing fantasies. From then on, my fantasy world would be populated with fantasies created pre-sex. I don't know why. There's this

chasm when I masturbate and my hand slips in; fantasies before I was thirteen, and then there's adult porn dating from when I was twenty-five or so. All the years, all the fucking, all the lovemaking in between is missing. A masturbatory blind spot. I go from junkyard cars and cinnamon lubricant to memories of porn movies I've watched; or I actually watch them and sidestep the perilous progression of fantasies altogether.

The porn I watch is a grown-up version of my fantasies. Women masturbating with vibrators. Women using shower nozzles. Voyeurs, people jerking off watching people jerking off. The same old stuff, grown-up. It's a Droste effect, a hall of mirrors. Watching women masturbate as I masturbate in the same way. I try to time my come to their come. Or replay their come again and again. Oddly, I'm not bisexual, any more than anyone is, I guess. I only like women in fantasy. By watching a woman masturbate, I'm watching myself masturbate.

I'm not bi; I'm narcissistic.

I can manipulate the vibrator's patterns of pulses with a flick of my thumb. The last option teases; it builds up slowly, from a tap tap tap to a torrent in seven seconds. Each time the rain-taps build up I almost come, but then it slows, and I'm left in a lurch like a girl with her umbrella blown inside out, utterly useless. My sex is a palm held to the stormy sky, feeling for rain. Masturbation is my rain dance. Soon the heavens will open. I free an ankle from lace and contract my legs straight, toes pointed. In a minute I'll wash up on the other side of bliss, oblivious as a drowned thing.

Charlie D'Eve

Leave it to Me

They told me if you don't show
Listen: someone else will
& then my body wakes on top of itself squirmy &

pretends it just loves a good party

here are the times when one part

Wants thing

And the other part

Wants Thing

Guy at the bar says
not to be offensive but

you look like
mouse in kitty's mouth—tail wriggling itself out.

In short you can join the threat when it's big enough

It's the small ones you gotta

watch out for

Steven Lang

Candlelight

Snack food—don't serve anything but snack food. That is what her intuition had told her. She remembered having read something once about avoiding utensils on first dates. Or maybe it was just her neurosis about the sound of fork tines grating across a man's teeth. She had not mentioned being easily irritated in her online profile. Still, the very idea of a dinner date (her first in months) had so nauseated her all day that a full meal was out of the question. It would be snacks and only snacks for her date with Leonard.

She lit four candles and set one in each corner of the carpeted ice fishing house. She had arranged it all beforehand based on a still life photo she had once seen by Henri Cartier-Bresson, although in the photo the candles were not lit, and they might have been oil lamps, and it might have been by another photographer (her memory of it was possibly a pastiche, and it may have been an etching), but she nodded to herself in approval anyway. Leonard was a photographer. An artist. And as an artist he would appreciate her efforts. And that appreciation, not the precision of her memory, is what mattered. Yet the inherent irony ("Candlelight" was the name of the online dating site where Jamie had found Leonard—was this indeed irony?) provided her with at least one clever line she could deliver to Leonard if the moment was right. Leonard had checked "sense of humor" in his

profile, and so had Jamie.

At this moment, Leonard was in his car in front of Jamie's house double-checking all of his camera gear. Jamie had requested that he bring his best equipment. He owned what was almost certainly the only medium-format digital camera in the otherwise pleasant but digitally-challenged northern Minnesota town of Bemidji, unless there was a similar camera he didn't know about at the university, one used strictly for technical purposes, such as at the end of a telescope or in a medical imaging lab. But Leonard was an artist, not a technician. And he was successful. Nearly every graduation photo, engagement picture, and wedding portrait in town bore his watermark. He was peerless for a very large radius, hundreds of miles. Most of those miles were farms and lakes, it was true, but nevertheless it was an area large enough to be seen from outer space.

Lenses, filters, batteries, flash—everything looked to be in order. Leonard zipped his camera bag closed and, per Jamie's instructions, made his way across her snowy front yard, around the back of the house, and down the hill toward the frozen lake. From the front, Jamie's house was nothing special—a modest, white brick house with a faux-Mediterranean facade that had seen better days. But around back it cascaded down the hill, three full stories with two large decks and stairs zigzagging up and down like an old walk-up tenement. Leonard glanced back at the house towering behind him. He believed he had noted it once years ago during a boating excursion on Lake Bemidji. He turned his attention to the lake, and spotted the icehouse not far from the shore. Week-old snow broke in crusty chunks

with Leonard's every step. Across the lake, the lights of whizzing, whirring snowmobiles shone like fireflies. The aurora borealis could be seen in the clear evening sky. He felt more alive than he had in months, if not years.

Inside the icehouse, Jamie was pouring handfuls of cashews and Craisins into a series of small tin cups. The blue-enamel-with-white-spots kind of tin cups. They were not vintage but they were adorable. There was no way she was going to blow this. No way, because Leonard was special. Granted, from a purely physical perspective, he was not all that attractive. But he had huge biceps, which he proudly displayed in his Candlelight profile photo. Jamie quickly reminded herself that it wasn't Leonard's biceps that made him special. It was his photography. He wasn't Cartier-Bresson good, but he was good. People knew his work, and not just in Bemidji. He had an online presence, the search-engine-optimized kind with thousands of followers and millions of hits. Jamie was a follower prior to finding him on Candlelight, the Northland's Premier Dating Site for Curious Adults. And from the moment she had clicked on his profile photo (which was immediately after she saw his bulging right bicep) she was sure that he was the one.

Jamie was thin and fit, though pale with a somewhat ruddy complexion that she hid beneath a layer of expensive makeup. She was nearsighted and wore oversized, thick-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses. She was not especially tall, but most of her height was in her legs. In fact, when she was a teen, she had learned to do the splits and she often did so across a piano bench when practicing scales. Her hair was naturally blond, but she

augmented its lustrous sheen with artificial highlights. Her eyebrows were preternaturally arched, like two ancient petroglyphs carved above icy blue eyes.

Jamie knew Leonard would have no trouble finding his way, since the icehouse was so near to the shore behind her house, a house that was, in her informed opinion, the nicest on Lake Bemidji. She had lived in it since she was a child. She would share this tidbit with Leonard if it came up in conversation. But she would not tell him that her father had carried her up the stairs every night when she was young—every night, that is, until the night he died alone out on the ice, drunk after a fight with her mother. She would not tell him she had run out onto the ice the next morning, barefoot, searching for her father, only to find him frozen stiff.

After the candles and snacks were all set, she sat down on the old Coleman cooler that had belonged to her father. A beer would be nice, she thought, but it would be best to wait. She was relieved when a moment later a knock came at the door. She stood up. "Hello?"

"It's Leonard."

I know, she thought. He might have said something more creative. Something like, "Land Shark." Or maybe, "Guess who?" And not, simply, "It's Leonard," which made no sense. "I'm Leonard" would make sense.

"Come in, Leonard."

Leonard pushed himself into the door, which by design opened outward. Jamie waited for him to realize his mistake. When he finally pulled the door open and stepped inside, she stared at him and said nothing. Leon-

ard exhaled audibly, perhaps, Jamie thought, at the sight of the candles and cups of nuts and berries as well as her black bra showing through her white lambswool sweater. She was sure it was showing, even in this light, but it wouldn't hurt to check. She looked down. Seeing not much more than dim gray fuzz, she looked back up. Leonard's neck appeared to have a tic. Maybe he had a muscle injury, or a neurological problem. Or, Jamie thought, perhaps the tic was a sign that he hadn't taken anything for his nerves, as she had, and that was both encouraging and depressing. She felt in her own jaw that she was tense as well, but believed that the prescription tranquilizer was already subduing her nerves effectively, and perhaps it was.

"I made snacks." Jamie gestured toward the tin cups.

"Nice. I brought a bottle of wine."

"Oh jeez," Jamie shook her head. "I don't have a corkscrew out here."

"No problem. I know a trick."

"Hum." Jamie wondered if wine mixed with tranquilizer might not be a good combination, or at least not yet. Leonard was closer now and Jamie could see his biceps bulging beneath his navy peacoat. She fixated for a moment. Not too long, but long enough that she felt the tranquilizer at work. Leonard stood stiffly, and didn't appear to be impressed by the candles. She wondered for a moment if she had made a mistake.

Leonard, too, thought he might have made a mistake, that quite possibly this woman and this date were not at all what he had hoped for. Leonard was tall and formerly athletic, but his chosen profession and life

circumstances did not lend themselves to an abundance of physical activity. He was not keen on dried fruits. He preferred steak. Leonard was hungry and had expected a meal, not snacks. He could have accepted a picnic of some sort, or at least a delivery pizza. But not trail mix. And he would have preferred to be in her house, or at a restaurant, or at least a coffee shop, not in this silly frozen box. He wasn't a boy and didn't want to act like one. This was putting it mildly since he lived with his mother and slept in his childhood bedroom in her basement. What he had hoped for from this date was an excuse to never go back. Perhaps, at age thirty-six, the idea of dating his way out of his mother's house was simply too much to ask. Still, Leonard couldn't bear the thought of having no hope at all, so he set his camera bag down and handed Jamie the bottle. "Peruvian Merlot."

Jamie looked at the label and set aside her trepidation. "So what's the trick?"

"You just unscrew the cap." Leonard smiled.

This was the humor! She knew it would happen, but she didn't think it would be so soon. And she didn't think it would be this good. Then she looked at the bottle again. In the dim icehouse there was no way to be sure one way or the other.

"It's not a screw top," Leonard said. "That was a joke."

Jamie set the bottle down. "Yes, I understood that to be a joke."

Leonard unzipped his camera bag and pulled out the impressively large Hasselblad digital camera. He removed the lens cap, checked the lens for dust, then replaced the cap. Jamie's head was spinning. "Take off your

shoes, Leonard. Get comfortable."

"What?"

"I mean, here, have a seat, on the cooler."

She pushed the cooler toward Leonard with her bare foot.

"Okay. But, where are you going to sit?"

"I'll be right back."

Leonard watched as Jamie, still barefoot, swung the icehouse door open and marched up the snowpath to her backdoor. A sensor tripped the floodlight, and she entered the house. Leonard sat down on the cooler, then stood back up and closed the icehouse door. No reason to freeze. He looked down at the cooler and then opened it. Inside were twelve bottles of Grain Belt beer along with a bottle of water and a few plastic bags filled with cashews and dried berries. He had been so sure she was the one, too. But these were terrible choices. He felt a deep sense of loss and a twinge of betrayal. Not just because of her pretty face, which appeared to match her profile picture exactly (a first), but because her bare feet spelled doom. She hadn't mentioned wanton disregard for the elements in her profile, which he'd printed off and kept in his shirt pocket all week. Still, she was a piano teacher, as his own mother had been, and Leonard desperately missed the sounds of the thirty-minute lessons she used to give to neighborhood kids when he was a boy. For his own sanity, Leonard needed to keep an open mind.

He closed the cooler and sat down. A moment later he stood up again, removed a beer from the cooler, and twisted it open. Why not? he

thought. He removed his camera from its carrying case and hung it around his neck. The familiar apparatus pressing against his chest was comforting. With a beer and some of these nuts and berries and maybe later a tin cup of wine and some good conversation what could possibly go wrong? Probably everything. He sat down again. In the far corner a cast-iron teakettle hummed atop a vintage propane stove/heater combo that matched the cooler exactly.

When Jamie returned, she was carrying an auger and wearing pink bunny slippers. She was also wearing pink bunny ears. The ears were held in place by a plastic band which compressed and poofed her long, wavy hair, but not enough to hide the modest tiara above the band. Leonard was beside himself. How did she know? Also, he was glad she was no longer barefoot, because he knew he would say something about it eventually, and it might come out wrong. Wrong for a first date. Or really any date. Just wrong, like something he'd have said to his mother, such as, "I'd put on some fucking socks and shoes if I were you. This isn't Antigua." Leonard knew that one of his weak points was this kind of talk (although he had not noted such talk in his Candlelight profile). Still, he felt he should say something now about the slippers, something positive. He could do this while disassociating it from her having been barefoot earlier.

"Nice slippers. Were your feet cold?" Leonard quickly realized he had largely failed to disassociate his judgment about her bare feet from his comment about the slippers. He held his breath and waited.

"Not really. I just thought, you know, maybe you were into bun-

nies." Jamie rotated the toes of the bunny slippers toward each other and bent her knees slightly. Her cream-colored stretch pants clung to her thighs like hot wax. She set the tip of the auger down in front of her and leaned on it with both hands.

"Oh, well, yes, there's an interest there." Leonard was confused. "But I don't remember having noted that in my profile."

"You don't? I could have sworn you had bunnies checked." Jamie knelt down next to the propane stove. She ran her fingers across the carpeting with one hand and held the auger with the other.

"Bunnies is an option?" Leonard wasn't sure he'd have checked it even if it were. Leonard became concerned. Or was it that he was embarrassed? He wasn't sure. Had he accidentally posted some of his bunny photos somewhere? If so, that wasn't the end of the world, since she was clearly receptive, and of course the photos were always tasteful. Maybe it was going to be okay. This was when Leonard saw the tail. Jamie had strapped a furry, pink rabbit tail around her waist—a little lower than her waist, actually—and as she knelt to tend the teakettle (which was heating up nicely) the tail perked up a bit.

Jamie turned back and saw that Leonard had taken a beer from the cooler without asking. He hadn't checked presumptuousness in his profile, but there he was with a beer in his hand. Still, it was not as if she had meant to drink it all herself. Perhaps Leonard had not been so presumptuous after all. Jamie realized she was staring at Leonard.

"So, how did you know?" he asked. His eyes carried an expression

of relief, but his lips were inquisitively pursed. He had not yet decided if he was turned on.

"How did I know what?"

"About the bunnies."

"Just a hunch, I guess. I'm very intuitive." Jamie opened the teakettle and peered inside. The truth was that she had stalked him. She covered the teakettle and focused again on the carpeting. The green shag she had installed in the icehouse, meant to look like Easter grass, looked more like the deep rough of a professional golf course. This was a special remnant sourced from a fancy Las Vegas hotel, or at least that's what the Craigslist ad had said, and she had no reason to disbelieve it because she had never been in a fancy Las Vegas hotel, not even in the lobby. "Would you like some nuts and/or berries?" She asked. "They're the expensive kind, from the co-op."

Things were starting to gel. Leonard held out his hand and Jamie poured some cashews and Craisins into his open palm. He moved to eat them, but she told him to wait. "Hold out your hand like this." She held her left hand out flat in front of her as if offering an hors d'oeuvres tray. Leonard copied the gesture, balancing the small mound of nuts and berries on his left palm. Jamie leaned in to eat them as a rabbit might, and Leonard felt a sensation that was less arousal than opportunism. With his right hand he quickly gripped his camera and switched it on. Jamie pulled her lower lip into her mouth, advanced her upper teeth, and tipped her nose back. She looked up at him for the photo. Leonard expertly adjusted his camera settings for the relative darkness, capturing a sharp, clean image even in the

dim candlelight.

Jamie asked Leonard to move aside. He complied, and she reached into the cooler for a beer for herself. Just then she remembered the wine. Maybe wine would be okay after all.

"So," Jamie said, "if that wine's not a twist-off, what's the trick?"

"You just remove the wrapping and start bumping the bottom of the bottle against the wall. The cork moves a little bit with each bump, and in no time you can just pull it out."

"Let's see you do it."

Leonard reached for the bottle. It was difficult to remove the wrapping with his fingernails, so he pulled a pocketknife from his camera bag. Leonard slid the tip of the knife under the wrapping and pierced it. (Jamie's heart jumped when she saw the knife blade gleaming in the flickering light.) Leonard spun the wrapping off the bottle, then slipped the knife, still open, into his shirt pocket. He examined the pink indoor/outdoor carpeting that covered the icehouse walls. Perfect. No risk of breaking the bottle. He tested a wall until he found a stud and then began the process. With four or five controlled blows, the cork was more than halfway out. From there, he easily removed it. Leonard smelled the cork and smiled.

"Let me smell." Jamie tipped her head back.

Leonard held the cork in front of Jamie. She sniffed it, wrinkling her nose, nodding. "Smells good, Doc." She then bit down on the cork and didn't let go. Neither did Leonard. Jamie kept at it, trying to bite the cork in half, but Leonard was too strong. He soon pulled the cork from Jamie's

gnawing teeth.

Leonard examined the cork. There was a wash of blood, some of which was also on his thumb. End of date, Leonard thought. Too bad it had to come so soon, with spilled blood no less. Leonard was not into biting. He pulled a lens cloth from his camera bag and sacrificed it to clean the blood from his thumb and from the cork.

"I'm sorry," Jamie said. "I didn't mean to get carried away."

"It's alright. You didn't bite me," Leonard said. "It must be your blood."

"I bit my tongue, pretty hard. Can you look?"

"You want me to check your tongue?"

"Yes." Jamie stood and held her mouth wide open.

Leonard was not able to see any blood, or much of anything at all. "It's too dark."

"Can you take a picture? Does that thing have a flash?"

Leonard was wondering if Jamie had any cavities, and what they might look like in a photo, because he hated the way fillings looked. Especially big, ugly fillings, like his mother's.

"I have a flash in my bag."

Leonard reached into his equipment bag and pulled out a large flash unit. It looked like something from the 1940s, like a giant lollipop. He attached it to the camera and pushed a button. The module came to life with a robotic whine. Jamie held her mouth open again and stuck out her tongue. Leonard focused and took a photo. The picture revealed nothing

unusual, and, to Leonard's relief, no visible fillings.

"Let's try another one," Jamie suggested. She held her mouth open again, with her tongue in another position. Leonard tripped the shutter and this time he could see where she had bitten herself. It was a fairly mild wound, but still bleeding.

"Let me see."

Leonard showed her the photo.

"Ah." Jamie removed her rabbit ears and sat down on the floor. Using one of the same tin cups, she poured out some wine and took a sip. She held the wine between her tongue and cheek, and it soothed the wound as much as it stung. Leonard sat down next to Jamie.

"This is fun!" Jamie let this burst from her subconscious, not because of the wine or the tranquilizer, but because the pain of the bite brought back a memory. She had bitten her tongue as a young girl on the day of her first piano lesson.

"Yes, this is fun." Leonard wasn't sure why he said that. In some sense it seemed natural to agree. But soon he corrected course. "I was concerned about your bare feet. It's too cold to go around like that. Common sense, really."

Jamie tested the continued effect of the tranquilizer against this statement.

"This is the dead of winter," Leonard continued. "In Bemidji. And we're on a frozen lake, at night. I think that speaks volumes about the appropriateness of proper footwear."

Jamie was going over his profile again in her mind. She didn't remember seeing asshole checked anywhere, but she planned to look again as soon as time allowed.

"No, wait," Leonard said through clenched teeth. "It's none of my business. Bare feet are a thing for me. It's an issue I have. Entirely personal." Leonard exhaled slowly.

"But it is quite cold," Jamie offered.

"Well, yes."

"So which is it?" Jamie asked. "Your personal shit, or my personal shit?"

Leonard would be checking her profile for any mention of personality disorders. It was possible he had missed something. With no other viable options, he decided to move on, for now.

"So, what's with the auger. Do you actually fish in here?"

A subject changer. Jamie noted this, feeling it was best to play along.

"No, it's too shallow to fish here. The auger's just for show."

"Sounds like fun."

Jamie raised an eyebrow, stood, and tiptoed behind Leonard to pick up the auger. She then kicked a thin, carpeted panel on the floor to one side revealing a patch of ice below. She placed the tip of the auger on the ice and began turning, cutting deftly through a few inches.

"It's a ten-incher, so a little slow going, but more bang for your buck if you know what I mean. Here, you try it." Jamie stepped aside and

offered the auger to Leonard.

"I've never augered."

"Don't worry, it's easy once you get it cranking."

Leonard set his camera on top of the cooler and took the auger from Jamie. He soon got the hang of it, and easily cut through what appeared to be a foot or so of ice. He pulled the auger up and leaned over to examine his work. When he did, the knife slipped from his pocket and began to fall. Leonard instinctively grasped at the air as if he were attempting to bare-hand a ground ball, but the knife fell right through and into the water. Leonard dropped to his knees as water splashed up hitting him in the eye. He wiped away the lake water and bit down on his own tongue to prevent himself from declaring that in no way, shape, or form was he crying. It was dark, but Jamie believed she could see ripples on the surface of the water in the shape of concentric hearts.

"This is horrible. My father gave me that knife when I was a scout."

Jamie didn't know what to do. She thought maybe a distraction was in order. "Take my picture, Leonard."

Leonard looked over at Jamie. To his surprise, she had removed her sweater. Leonard picked up his camera and popped on the flash. Jamie knelt by the hole, held her face to the ice, and smiled up at him. Leonard worked to frame the shot. A storm of ATVs could be heard whizzing at some distance across the lake.

"Wait, I need the ears."

"Maybe just one without them."

"No, with."

Jamie reached for the ears and put them back on. She then lay across the carpeting with her face just above the icy water. Leonard stood directly above her, focused the camera on her cheek, and took a picture. He looked at the photo and his neck throbbed when he realized the flash had penetrated the water. There appeared to be a reflection in the photo from something beneath the surface.

"Look at this." Leonard showed Jamie the photo.

She sat up and noted that he had cut off the ears. Decisive moment, ruined.

Leonard waited.

Jamie didn't respond at first, but soon she saw past the problematic composition. "The knife!"

"How deep is the water here?"

"Maybe three feet."

"Do you think I could reach it?"

"You could try." Jamie took another sip of wine.

Leonard pulled off his jacket and began to unbutton his shirt. There were several tattoos, as advertised. Nothing obnoxious. A foamy beer mug on his forearm, a black cat on his tricep, and a broken heart on his chest. And his biceps were exactly as portrayed in his profile. But now it became apparent that he was not equally fit in the abdomen, chest, or shoulders. This was a disappointment, but one that could be remedied, Jamie believed, by daily trips together to the gym.

Once topless, Leonard shivered (a shiver which transmitted itself to Jamie's spine) and knelt beside the hole. Leonard imagined he'd have to be careful not to get cut, but first things first. He needed to be able to touch the bottom. He plunged his arm straight down into the water. The initial shock of the cold made him wish he had taken a gulp of wine first, but it was too late now. He lowered his shoulder toward the frigid surface. His fingertips brushed against a few wispy weeds, but he couldn't reach the bottom. He pulled his arm back up.

"Wow, that's quite a sensation." Leonard looked at his arm, and casually but suggestively flexed his bicep muscle.

Jamie hopped over to examine his arm, touching his bicep (too soon?), which was warmer and softer than she had anticipated.

"Let me try," Jamie said, retracting her hand. "I think I can reach."

"Are your arms longer than mine?" Leonard was sure they weren't, but he didn't want to extend any further judgments. He began to put his shirt back on. "I doubt it." This statement, he immediately realized, was indeed a type of judgment.

"Not with my arm. With my leg. I can pick up anything with my toes. Even a pocketknife. I bet I can reach it."

Leonard pulled his shirt back on and buttoned it up. Jamie watched, wondering if she should put her sweater back on at this point. There was no need to overthink things, she decided. She kicked off the slippers and looked at Leonard in earnest. "I'm going to take off my pants. No pictures."

Leonard didn't put the camera away, but he did replace the lens cap. Jamie thought about this for a moment, because, although she had asked him to bring the camera, and although she had removed her sweater voluntarily, she was now about to take off her pants and drop her bare leg into a hole in the ice to pick up an open pocketknife and this was no longer the Candlelight date she had envisioned. This was something else. Something for which no box could be checked or unchecked. It was a test of some kind. A test which either of them could fail at any moment, miserably. She took a deep breath, slipped her thumbs under the waistband of her pants, and began to pull them down.

"Stop," Leonard said. "Maybe I should turn around."

Jamie watched him intently. This was make or break stuff. This was rhetorical "Find Your Match on Candlelight or It's on Us" type of stuff. Would she ask him to turn around, or would she ask him not to? Would she give him the option? Was the ball in her court, or his? She wasn't sure. She felt time moving at the speed of a photograph. 1/125th of a second passed. Then 1/60th Then 1/30th. A different thought passed through her mind with every lengthening fraction of a second.

Finally, Leonard spoke: "I think I should go."

Again with the humor? Or maybe this was something else. "You mean go home? Why?"

"I don't understand why you would walk around barefoot in the middle of winter, that's why."

Jamie instantly ran out of tranquilizer. But with sobriety came

clarity, for she herself had been judging Leonard from the moment she had clicked on his bicep online, and for the most part she had been, and continued to be, wrong about him. He wasn't entirely perfect. He wasn't entirely fit. He smelled, probably. His nose was a little crooked. Perhaps he cheated at golf, or tipped poorly, or sang in the shower. She took a few extra seconds to think of what to say. Would she retaliate? Ask him to leave? Run inside for more tranquilizer? But then she thought ahead. She thought about how she had wanted the evening to end.

"No, Leonard. Let's not judge each other. Not right now. Let's just try to get your pocketknife back."

Leonard was unsure about the idea, but the pocketknife was important to him. When Leonard was just nine-and-a-half, his father, who had been an auto collision repair specialist, died in a car wreck at the age of 40. (Leonard was certain that this was irony.) In all those nine-and-a-half years, his father had never judged him. His mother, on the other hand, had. For his birthday that year, his father had presented him with the pocketknife sealed inside a manila envelope on which the words "BE PREPARED" were carefully typed.

Leonard nodded once and said, "Yes, let's just try to get the knife back."

"And you don't have to turn around if you don't want to."

With quiet determination, Jamie resumed removing her pants, revealing a racy black thong with a small, gold letter J hovering dead center just below the lace trim. Jamie ran the tip of her middle finger over the J,

tracing it from bottom to top. This struck Leonard as curious. Did she iron that on? Was it embroidery? Silkscreen? She stood facing him, wearing only her underwear, bra, and the bunny ears. Her thin white legs appeared to dance in the flickering candlelight. Instinctively (perhaps too instinctively) Leonard reached for his camera. Jamie's eyes widened.

"I said no, fucking, pictures."

Leonard held his hand up in apology. He coiled his index finger and pinned it under his thumb like a trapped rattlesnake. He had recently photographed a woman's bare legs in his studio, at a photoshoot replete with bunny-fetish paraphernalia, and Jamie's legs had compelled him to repeat himself.

Jamie, having seen that same photo shoot in person from behind a pine tree outside the studio's north-facing window, had felt jealously then. Now, in some sense, she felt vindication. She sat down next to the fishing hole with her left leg extended across the carpeting. She dipped her right foot into the water and immediately flinched.

"Freezing, I know," Leonard said. "Don't try to get used to it. Just go in all at once."

Jamie nodded and looked down, gathering herself. She thrust her leg in until her upper thigh swelled tight around the perimeter of the hole. The cold was so shocking she barely realized her foot was firmly planted on the lake bottom. "I'm there."

"Can you feel the knife?"

Supporting herself with her hands, Jamie bobbed her foot in an

ever-widening circle until she felt the sharp steel knife on the ball of her foot. "That's it."

Leonard scrunched his toes inside his boots. He could almost feel the blade himself as Jamie grasped at it.

"I need to concentrate." Jamie closed her eyes. She felt the blade turn toward the webbing between her toes. Unable to free it, she winced in pain as it cut her skin.

Leonard panicked. He did not want any more blood. "Forget the knife."

"No, Leonard. I can get it."

Leonard considered pulling Jamie up physically. It was true he was no longer fit, but he was no milquetoast. He had once pulled a man over a bus seat by the necktie. But that kind of physical contact with Jamie was out of the question. He considered verbally demanding that she leave the knife where it was, but decided that it ultimately may have been his father's verbal demands that had left his mother so world-worn and needy. Besides, his father would have wanted him to get the knife back. Leonard calmed himself and let Jamie work her foot around until she found the knife once more.

"I've got the handle this time." Jamie adjusted the angle of her leg and began to pull her foot up. She lifted first her knee and then her calf out of the water. Finally, there between her toes, was the knife. She dropped it on the carpeting and shook her leg for several seconds, either to dry it off or to warm it up, Leonard couldn't tell. But it was the sexiest thing he had seen

in years. He nearly said this out loud, but caught himself. He leaned down to pick up the knife.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Leonard." Jamie examined the cut on her toe, which was long and, although not very deep, was bleeding slightly.

"You need direct pressure on that." Leonard reached out with a lens cloth. "But maybe you should disinfect first. Let me carry you back to your house."

Jamie imagined Leonard's biceps flexing beneath her body as he carried her inside. She imagined guiding him to the upstairs bathroom, even though there was a downstairs bathroom, as an excuse to get him upstairs. (She kept her tranquilizer in the upstairs bathroom as well.) They would pass her baby grand piano on the way up, and she would drag her toes across the keys, leaving a faint trace of blood on the ivories, perhaps even striking a recognizable chord. Indeed, she was possibly about to experience being carried up the stairs of her house by someone other than her father for the first time in her life.

"No, Leonard, that's not necessary. I think that's nice, though. I would've liked being carried."

Leonard stood impotently, envisioning his every move if only she had said yes. "You could change your mind. I could still carry you."

"I'm fine. I can walk on my own."

"I'm strong enough."

"It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I saw you carrying your mother."

Leonard dropped the knife again, on the floor this time. Here, Leonard might have become angry, or terrified. But instead he felt relief. Finally, someone knew.

In fact, Jamie had seen him carrying his mother from room to room and up and down the stairs by watching him through binoculars from behind an oak outside the living room windows of his mother's house.

Leonard moved to pick up the knife, then stopped. "She has trouble, my mother. Her circulation. It's bad."

Jamie nodded.

"Her feet get so cold, especially in winter." Leonard looked again at Jamie's toe, which was dripping a bit of blood now. "And she's a hemophiliac. She would bleed out from a cut like that."

Jamie removed her rabbit ears. "Don't you want to know how I saw you?"

Leonard didn't answer. Instead, he imagined Jamie moving quickly through his mother's wooded front yard, peering through the windows between the open curtains, watching him carry his mother from room to room whenever she asked. It was enough for Leonard to imagine this voyeurism. He didn't want to hear about it directly from Jamie.

Leonard bent down and picked up the knife. He held it up to examine the blade, then wiped it dry on his shirt, drawing it several times across his left bicep. Finally, he folded it closed and once again slid it into

his shirt pocket.

"I don't mind so much," he said. "It's just that I wouldn't want my mother to know."

Jamie bowed her head in agreement. "It's good that you take care of her."

"It's not easy."

"I know it's not. And I know you sleep in that little bed in the basement." She glanced back at her own house. "Your mother was my piano teacher when I was a kid. Did you know that?"

Leonard drew a quick breath. "Oh my God, I remember you! You were the homeschooling victim. Right?"

"It didn't start out that way, but after my father died, my mother kept me at home. Except for the piano lessons and church, she was afraid to let me leave the house."

"I know the feeling," Leonard said. "I've actually never lived alone myself. I mean, sure, I moved to Duluth when I was in college, but even then I had roommates. I graduated early, then moved right back in with my mother."

"Dead," Jamie said. "I mean, my mother's dead."

"I'm sorry," Leonard said. And he believed he was.

"It's okay," Jamie said. And she believed it was. Solemnly she placed the rabbit ears back on her head and looked down at her bare feet. "Did you at least enjoy the candlelight?"

"Yes. I meant to say something. I should have." Leonard took a

half step toward Jamie, then retreated by the same amount. “It was a nice touch.”

“Thank you.” Jamie adjusted her bra strap. “If you want, you can take my picture now.”

Leonard reached for his camera and didn’t hesitate this time. In one fluid movement, he took the knife from his pocket, opened it, and set it next to Jamie’s bare foot. He knelt down and focused on the drop of blood collecting between her frigid toes. Relieved to see the blood coagulating, he held his breath and took a picture.

Jamie worked her toes over the knife and grasped it by the handle once more. She looked at the hole in the ice and then back at Leonard. He nodded as if agreeing to a long-term secret. Jamie raised her hands to her armpits, bent her wrists forward, and pulled her lower lip under her front teeth. With the knife held tight in one foot, she hopped toward the hole on the other. As she held the knife above the water, a drop of blood fell. Leonard stepped back, raised his camera, and framed another picture. Jamie scrunched her nose, closed her eyes, and let the knife go.

Bryce Emley

Mother, Mother, Ocean

> "You are the kind of guy who always hopes for a miracle at the last minute."
>
> - Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City*

It's 11 a.m. You were driving until 4 a.m., but you're here now and awake.

Reusable containers holding variously palatable foods are crowding the counters. The counters are usually clean, vacant, as you recall. None of the containers are your mother's.

You recognize what these things often signify.

You eat cake.

• • •

Your mother's hospital room seems alive. There is beeping and pulse and mechanical hum. There are tubes.

When you speak into her ear she nods, pants "Okay" with the abruptness of the breathless. This seems the only word she can say.

You tell her things you've never said to her, things you want to be sure she knows. Everyone is saying it's important that you do this, though

it seems like something people do in direr circumstances than you are convinced these are.

By afternoon, she doesn't nod or pant "Okay" when you speak to her.

• • •

Your father tells you and your sisters that your mother never told him her cancer had come back. Brynne tells him that he went to chemo treatments with her, that this is the third time it has come back. He says he didn't know.

When you were four, blood flooded your father's brain, so you assume the two of them must be talking about different things. This happens sometimes, because of the flooding. It sounds like water when he speaks.

• • •

After your mother's first diagnosis in 2008, your sisters began researching holistics. Brooke tells you that grief and the lungs are connected. People with other internalized emotions—hatred and resentment, for example—tend to have issues with other organs—the pancreas, for example.

There has been much grief in your mother's life, but when Brooke talks about grief and your mother's lungs, she means your father.

• • •

Fluid on the lungs is a term you've heard them use—the doctors, your sisters. It isn't the cancer that concerns people, but this.

No one tells you what the fluid is. What you know is that there's a flood inside her chest, that when she takes a breath you can feel it bubble beneath her ribs, that every time she breathes it sounds like drowning.

• • •

When people visit, they want to know what happened. You recite a timeline you didn't participate in, pieced together from Brynne and your father: Monday she was fine; Tuesday she was sick; Wednesday she was too weak to text Brynne about being sick; Thursday the doctor sent her to the ICU; Friday she ate breakfast, her first meal in three days.

Saturday, you are here.

• • •

Aunt Esther calls your mother's phone. You hold it up to your mother's ear, check for silences on the other end. It sounds like prayer.

You blink and there's a dampness. It feels foreign, sudden, the way rain does when the sun is out. There aren't many occasions one must do things like this.

• • •

"She's a fighter. I mean if anyone can get through this…"

"I know."

"Just, the things she's been through. Beau and your dad and work, and this on top of it."

"…"

"…She was such an inspiration to Kerri, back when—when we were going through some things. She would tell me how just being around your mom, she got so much strength from her."

"Thank you."

"You know, I want you to know your dad wasn't—you were too young to know him before, but when I was starting out, I'd be up in front of the class, nervous as hell, and he'd check in and fire off jokes to the kids, ask if I needed anything. He was always joking. Always willing to help."

"…"

"I just wanted you to know—"

• • •

Her arms thrash wildly, as if she's swimming. If you don't hold them down she pulls at her oxygen mask and its tubes and makes noises that sound like pleas. You hold her arms down. The oxygen continues. The swimming stops. When you release, she starts thrashing again and continues until you

hold her down or until the nurse returns with Dilaudid.

You spend much of the day holding your mother.

• • •

"She is guh, she's guh person, good people." Your father says variations of these phrases over and over until you only know what he's saying because you've just heard the words as words and not as the wash of sounds they become in his mouth.

• • •

You spend the night in the room with your mother. You sleep in a faux-leather chair that doesn't so much recline as tilt. You sleep through the nurses turning your mother hourly. You sleep through the loud young night shift nurse with the large body and wild beard talking at your mother. You sleep through sunrise and shift change. You can't be sure all of these things happened, but it's likely.

It exhausts you to simply exist here, even for a night, even with your full and empty lungs.

• • •

The doctor tells you and your sisters and father that recovery would be a miracle. You understand that this is euphemistic. Your father listens, in his way.

The doctor also tells you this seems like torture, her breathing. Breathing is a more subjective term than you had considered. The oxygen mask is doing what her body is not. This is something of a loophole to the DNR/DNI.

These are difficult conversations. You all agree to continue them tomorrow.

• • •

Helena is the nurse you see most. She goes to church with your parents. She's a slight woman, and serious. When she asks questions you answer and she continues to look at you as if expecting more. This makes you uncomfortable, but she's kind.

When your mother starts thrashing again, Brooke goes looking for Helena and finds her crying in a utility closet.

• • •

It's after midnight, and you're home. You take a walk. When you lived here, you did this often.

For no conceivable reason, you imagine that when you walk past

your high school ex-girlfriend's house, her father will be outside, though you've never seen him out this late. He's a religious man. You think he might say, "Is that Bryce?" He's never said this to you.

As you walk by he's on his doorstep making brittle noises. He gets up, dumps a dish's contents into the yard.

"Is that Bryce?" He hugs you. He offers you shelled nuts. "They're almonds—a biblical nut."

Inside, you begin to tell him everything. He stops you.

"A miracle, the doctor said?"

You nod.

"The doctor." He laughs. "Miracles happen, man. I'm tellin' ya." He tells you some. They are inexplicable.

A bird starts singing in the corner of the room. You hadn't noticed it before. Even your high school ex-girlfriend's father seems to notice it for the first time.

"You know that bird only sings when I'm in tune with God, when I'm writing or praying and I hit on something that's aligned with His Word."

You aren't sure how to respond.

"There are no coincidences. Do you believe that?"

You say you do.

"I mean I can't sleep, so I'm outside eating almonds, a biblical nut, and you walk by. You can't make this stuff up."

You agree that you can't.

"You know Jeremiah?"

You say you do.

"Jeremiah one: The word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then said the Lord unto me, You have seen well, for I will hasten my word to perform it."

He gives you his card, tells you he wants to anoint your mother tomorrow.

You walk home and your skin feels like rain.

• • •

Everybody has been telling you she is the strongest woman they know. And you think it, too, and that there are different ways to be strong. Her body needs some of those ways, others less so.

• • •

It's morning.

Swinging his inept right leg, your father moves slowly. You try to be slow, which becomes a practice in frequent standing. You want to tell Brooke about your high school ex-girlfriend's father and the almonds and the bird, but you have to wait for your father. He wouldn't remember how to get to your mother's room on his own.

When you reach the ICU doors, your phone rings. You are close enough that if Brooke were to speak louder, you could hear her twice: as she speaks into her phone from your mother's room and again as those words come through your phone's speaker.

She tells you you should come in.

• • •

When you leave the hospital, everything looks remarkably the same as it did.

It's morning.

§§§

As you drive home from the hospital, your father tells you that other women in town "wanted" him. For the first time it sounds as if this statement isn't about him. Or, for the first time, it occurs to you to think that.

Your father also tells you that you and your sisters are all he has now. And that you will go back to school and Brynne will go back to her baby and Brooke will go and he will have nothing left. Beau will be in prison for, at minimum, another fourteen years. He doesn't mention him.

• • •

It begins to feel like there is a dam inside your chest, bulging. When you are not talking to people you pretend to recognize, you need other things to do. You eat stale doughnuts, study your skin in a mirror, let out the dogs, watch college basketball, jerk off, take out the trash, read emails, etcetera. These feel like things you might otherwise be doing.

• • •

What a stroke is and what it means become different things. You are fairly certain you once heard that your father sustained frontal lobe damage. You know the frontal lobe is the small continent of the brain where reasoning dwells, where the things that make us human happen.

• • •

Your father says again that she never told him anything, but she told you things. You explain that no one knew she was dying. It wasn't the cancer, it was the pneumonia, the fluid. He says he didn't know that.

This happens several times daily, and you feel the dam inside your chest, how it groans.

Your father says his mind is foggy, when he tries to speak it's just fog.

• • •

It isn't until you're looking that you realize this house is saturated with clutter: half-finished to-do lists, newsletters, magazines, coupons, envelopes with phone numbers written on them. On the patio there's a stack of empty cardboard boxes; in a desk a Ziploc bag full of phone chargers. There's a bag of new clothes in your nephew's size, bags of old clothes. There are spare lids, spare washers, loose screws, potentially useful plastic pieces, reused tinfoil, empty film canisters.

All this has seeped slowly into your mother's home. Because she relegated these things to drawers, cabinets, spare rooms—places you rarely look—you never noticed its growth, its absurd excess, what that meant.

• • •

While staying with your mother at the Mayo Clinic in 2009, you learned that your father had told your mother—lighter by four lymph nodes and half a lung—that she should lose fifteen pounds.

He says nothing like this about her now. Instead, he has stories about girls, about frantically dressing as a father pulled into a driveway, about a trailer park neighbor asking him if he had a "big dick," about skirts pulled up, about "necking," about receiving phone calls twenty years after graduation, etcetera. He tells many of these to Pastor Simpson when he visits.

Brooke tells you about the talk she gave your father about what is respectful and appropriate.

You think these stories may be his language, that they are single units of expression he uses to say what he otherwise has no words for because of the stroke and the frontal lobe. You tell this to Brooke. She's angry.

You think over your theory again and again. You must remind yourself that it could make sense, given the frontal lobe.

You hope that your father sustained frontal lobe damage.

• • •

"She nev—she ne'er…" Your father grunts. "I'm sorry. I'm just fah—it's fah-yee. I try to say something, and it's just fog."

• • •

The men in the immediate family of the deceased are expected to wear suits to funeral services, and black shoes and black ties and not faded skinny chinos and tennis shoes and a dark brown tie that is so dark it is nearly black.

The mall in West Palm Beach has all of those black things, including the same pair of shoes you already own but chose to leave three states away, along with your black tie and black pants and suit jacket—

things you remember staring at in your closet while packing and deciding you didn't want to take because of what that would mean.

• • •

You keep thinking about the to-do lists, how many there were, how none of them were complete.

• • •

"When I worked here, they trained us on how to help people in—these situations."

"..."

"You can, and should, let it out. It's okay. It's unhealthy not to. That's what this is for."

"..."

"I know you want to be strong for everyone like she was. But no one expects it. It's okay."

"I know."

"Okay. Just making sure you know."

• • •

The morning of the funeral, your father calls you into his room to write words in a notepad for him, including *superlatives*, *Louisiana*, *Notre Dame*, *dorm*, etcetera. You recognize these as keywords in some of his stories, the ones in which he is popular in high school, in which Catholic girls undress him, in which girls hiked their skirts up to get A's, in which he flunks out of Wake Forest, in which he crashes his first Austin Healey, in which Kathy Krause leaves him for a Notre Dame student who beats her, in which he scouts Oral Roberts freshmen for a date to a party, etcetera.

• • •

Beau wasn't granted furlough, so Brynne recorded him speaking through the house phone into her cellphone. The church's sound lady plays it over the speakers during the service.

"After Dad's stroke, Mom continued to raise four kids and then even had to raise her husband. And she never stopped, never complained. That would be too ordinary, only humans do that."

There seems nothing else to say after your brother, the prisoner, says these things.

Suddenly your father rises, holding a notepad. Brynne asks if anyone knew he would do this. Brooke shifts in her seat. There's talk of stopping him. His voice is a puddle on his tongue. He's telling stories you'd hoped he wouldn't tell, the stories he has told you for over two decades, but

for the first time they are told together, consecutively, or for the first time you listen to them all as one story. Brooke keeps looking at you. Everyone is quiet. Everyone is listening. They laugh when he laughs. You are shifting. Brynne asks if you're going to stop him. Everyone is listening. You want him to stop, but you think this is important. Brooke is gesturing. You are listening and restless. There is the dam in your chest. Your father is talking, despite the puddle. Pastor Bruce puts an arm over his shoulder, thanks him. Your father sits and people are clapping.

• • •

It rained the day your mother died. Someone says the two events are related.

It has rained every day since, continues through the internment.

• • •

When you ask others about your father's funeral speech, they assure you it was hardly comprehensible, but they got the gist, though they weren't sure about the part about the short skirt.

• • •

There are many people in the house. This includes Uncle Don, a gospel artist who pastors and middle-aged church-goers lead you to believe is a minor celebrity. He performed a three-song medley on the church piano during the service, culminating in his hit song "God Will Make a Way."

Uncle Don is holding his phone between his head and your father's, playing Jimmy Buffet's "A Pirate Looks at Forty," your father's favorite song. Uncle Don is singing the words; your father is slurring them into melody, a moist, throaty sound rippling beneath it, his eyes glossed into wet stones.

Mother, mother, ocean,

I have heard you call.

You recognize that it should be an affecting moment.

• • •

You're reading poetry and have NFL draft predictions playing on the TV. It's late, everyone is gone. Above the discussion of Jameis Winston's NFL prospects, you hear your father speaking across the house, but not to the only other person in the house, which is you.

He's not speaking the way people do to other people across a house, projecting.

You look back to the poem you're reading. It closes: "Who would think / it was ever just us."

• • •

You turn the knob to make the shower hotter. The stream is dozens of small fires on your skin, or perhaps hail. You turn the valve again, and you are still unsure. You keep turning until it stops turning and you are sure. You are surprised at the heat, how you can bear it, how the burn becomes the steam and you breathe it.

The towels in the bathroom are new. There is a task at hand, to get dry. This is something you can do. There is no ceremony, no speaking, no waiting, and no one.

There must be no softer towel in the world.

§ § §

Grieving is referred to as a process.

Precipitation is another process, which is similar, in its way.

• • •

"When she would wake up and move her arms, did you think it looked like she was swimming?"

"Yes."

"And when she inhaled, that it sounded like she was drowning?"

"Yes."

"There was fluid in her lungs, and she couldn't breathe. It probably felt like she was drowning."

"…"

"I wanted to say that, but I thought it would be hard for you."

"…"

"Maybe she was dreaming about drowning."

• • •

It's your father's birthday.

You and your sisters give him a card and a bag of Twizzlers. He seems appreciative.

• • •

From an Oliver Sacks essay you learn that the actor Spalding Gray sustained frontal lobe damage in a car crash and was prone to being submerged in his memories and fantasies after. Often, he would stare into deep bodies of water, purposeful. He would later throw himself from a bridge.

• • •

Brooke doesn't say it, but she hates your father. Instead, she tells you he was thinking of leaving your mother after you were born. Later he will tell you this was before you were born. You don't know who he is because of the frontal lobe, because you were four when it was flooded.

• • •

Your father asks if you'd like to go with him on a drive. He takes you to the lake and parks. He tells you he comes out here often, that some days he sits for hours, "Just looking."

He gets out. You switch seats and drive home.

• • •

Your father tells you that he knows it's not right, but he'd rather go ahead and be with your mother. He says Aunt Susan told him what heaven is like and it sounds like a neat place.

Instead, he goes up to Orlando with Brooke. This isn't ideal for anyone, particularly Brooke. But it will work, the way treading water does, for now.

• • •

Spalding said that his mind was filled with fantasies of his mother, and of water, always water.

"Why water, why drowning?" I asked.

"Returning to the sea, our mother," he said.

• • •

There's a leather-bound devotional on your desk. Aunt Susan gave you and your sisters each a copy. It's the same one your mother was reading with Beau and discussing over the phone every day. You open it to today. *I have promised to meet all your needs according to My glorious riches*, it opens. This seems a divine message, which helps.

April 3rd seems equally divine. As do April 4th and June 19th and August 7th and December 29th.

In Beau's recording, he'd said that the morning after they told him about your mother, he opened his devotional. It was March 24th and began, *This is a time in your life when you must learn to let go of loved ones.* He said he knew this wasn't a coincidence. He said there are no coincidences.

• • •

A week passes before you call your father. He says he knows what he wants to say, but it's still *fah-yee, still fah*—it's just *fog*.

• • •

When you were in the hospital Brooke told you she had remembered that your mother used to pray Psalm 23 with her. Brooke was a child then. You don't know if she still prays, but she told you she prayed the first verses over your mother, over and over. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," she recited for you. "He makes me to lie down in green pastures: He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul: He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures: He leads me beside—"

• • •

You have begun to admire ocean, how it contains, is contained.

• • •

The monitor didn't flat-line that morning like you would have expected. It continued pulsing in waves, in-time with some other rhythm, indifferent.

You can recall this clearly.

Imagining her feels like holding water. It isn't pain. It has only become a lack in your own weight, as if you are sinking.

Abby Minor

American Quartet

I.

Warren wants us to be anarchists with him in preparation for apocalyptic shortages of quinces
and herbal medicines / I want to be a rapper

with a cameo in G. O'Keeffe's Black Pansy & Forget-Me-Nots. Just let me be a ladder with

the nine green steps.

Just let me be the one attached to flowers and their messages / it's raining and Hey the desert

plants and buttes I saw were the color of make-up, low-
high color and peach fire, concrete and hollow green

and silver and orange, that's the west. I want to move

in groups and be communal, antinomian
and block-printing our own napkins like

at Bloomsbury but also

I'd really like to speak about the wretchedness of justifying art class by saying it'll make kids
better at computer stuff.

II.

On this

Warren and I agree: we don't want to dig

a well without a blues

for digging wells. I really can't dig a well
at all and Warren can but having this first
thing in common

even though he once said art comes
second to survival he gave me this

beautiful red garlic which he could not have made
without art so

we consider each other
companions of the flame.

III.

In the shiny woods with my lover by all the crazy
little waterfalls and he started to talk

about Hannah Arendt again. I thought the daylight
moon is thin as a forget-me-not and

scratchy on its other side is like pansy black. It's weird
in the mournful eastern mountains where

we live Kevin said appearances are important like
the "fact" that this spot of good-smelling blue

shade used to be an ocean floor
isn't true. I said maybe geological time is like

a poem, it can just help you understand
why it feels so interesting here and down

in the town I love the new pine siding
on the hut in the community

park which is a very humble park given for an air
force pilot by his parents. They have these "home-

town heroes" flags everywhere now in towns
with pictures of local people who died in war we

walk underneath & there's no song. I'm white

so I think all I wanted was to be Considered
Suicide/When the Rainbow was a Bluff.

IV.

~ Dream: Everyone
in the old school building
in sleeping sacks eating

ham pot pie and telling stories

forever but some people would talk too much and I'd want

to be alone.

~ Real Thing: After I put two hundred
and fifty thousand miles on it and got
backed into twice and tore

the mirror off on the side of the barn my dead
dad's car finally wouldn't start. It

turned out it only needed a new battery so I cried and
wrote a kind of love note to my mechanic

Harry who makes me think about how all
the people who are different from

you are also different

from each other.

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